

Trace: A Visual and Sound Response to the Space and Place of Nettleham Hall

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Abstract

The practice led research of Clem Monro and Annie Morrad are visual and sound collaborations of space and place. *Trace* is the first visual and sound response that we have made on location, the former manor house and ruin of Nettleham Hall in Lincolnshire. The responses made at this location act as an experiential inquiry into the communication of absence, trace and the phenomenologically experienced.

We experience absence and trace through ourselves, our consciousness and in particular, awareness of the senses. The perception of architectural space involves the body as an entirety, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. When we perceive space and place, all our senses are affected. Through awareness of the senses our bodies react physically and emotionally to the ruin, this reaction is felt through mediation of the body with that particular place. The felt sense of absence and trace is possible through the body's reaction and interaction to the space that is particular to the ruin. It can also be felt through the presence of the remaining space and through the body's keen awareness in detecting the way jagged natural light moves through curious open crevices and surfaces within the buildings' remaining structure. 'We are forever in the here, and it is from that our experiences take place,'¹ the here, being the present. It is through the body that multiple sensory information such as; vision, touch, sound, smell and taste interact

¹ Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*. (Ohio University Press, 2012),4.

with the environment around us. It is 'through our senses that we receive stimuli from the environment and can convey them to the brain.'²

Each architectural place has an individual existence. The live film and sound recordings for *trace* were made on location at Nettleham Hall. Capturing and recording duration and time within multiple spaces, the recordings have contributed to a heightened sense of experiential quality of the ruin. This has enabled Annie to explore through experiential and experimental improvised sound using a tenor and alto saxophone. By using improvisation, the essence of the place in atmosphere, history and spatial architectural elements was transformed into sound. Through its intuitive approach, this method of working produces a unique and profound understanding, engaging with essence and nuances. Improvisation gave an immediate as opposed to mediated connection, one that conspired to unify all aspects. As a reaction to the ontology of space and sound within the ruin of the Hall, Clem made film recordings that responded directly to Annie's live improvised sound. The film recordings act to mediate a discourse between sound, absence and trace. Based on the functions attributed to the Hall the visual and sound piece forms a universal presence that then refers back to this place, through art installation.

² Maria João Durão, *Embodies Space: A Sensorial Approach to Spacial Experience*, Space, Propulsion & Energy Sciences International Forum: SPESIF-2009. AIP Conference Proceedings, Volume 1103. AIP Conference Proceedings, Volume 1103, Issue 1, p.399-406. http://www.astrosociology.org/Library/PDF/Durao_SPESIF2009/pdf (accessed 15 January 2016)

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to act as a precursory snapshot of ongoing practice-led¹ research. The project *Trace* is about how absence and trace is observed and registered within a specific and phenomenological setting, the architectural ruin and how one responds to this, through lens based media and saxophone sound recordings. In order to identify more fully the elements that the research poses, responses to the question are divided into two reflexive and inter-connected parts: *how is absence felt and experienced within the ruin: how does one communicate absence through lens based media and saxophone sound recordings*. This deliberate action allows for a more rigorous investigation and philosophical grounding into the areas of phenomenology and ontology that the first part of the research question has taken. This action of theoretical contextualization will allow for a more critical approach in underpinning the significance of the practice in relation to the context of the research.

2. Absence and the Ruin

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition for the word absence is, the non existence, or lack-of.² This project looks at absence within a specific and phenomenological setting, the architectural ruin. In order to situate and understand the context of absence, the architectural ruin requires investigation by means of understanding the nature and meaning of the ruin itself.

When a building or structure ceases to function as it was originally intended for, it starts a slow process of decline and decay. Over time the building becomes

structurally unsound and nature is allowed to invade, seeking out exposed spaces and small cracks in which to take root and grow; organic matter starts to take form. Over an extended period of time, the building is propelled into a further state of decay where nature has the upper hand and full momentum of organic growth. At the point where decay turns the building into a ruinous state, the building becomes a ruin. At this point of intersession between the present state of the ruin and the past intent of the building, a profound sense or feeling of absence can be felt and experienced; the ruin imbues the non-existence and lack of, that is the essence of, absence. In this context then, absence is described not as a tangible thing or object, but as a feeling or felt sense. Situated in place within the ruin, absence holds form and meaning. It is a manifestation of feeling shaped from the felt experience within the present state of the ruin and a universal memory (what the building was originally intended for). Absence is both experiential and phenomenological, meaning observation of absence is achieved through direct experience of place and space.

How we experience and perceive absence is through our selves, our consciousness and in particular, our senses. Our bodies react physically and emotionally to the ruin. This reaction is felt through mediation of body with place. Like absence, place is not a thing or actual object that exists in the world; it is not something that we go out and locate. Place exists because our bodies interact with it and make it so. Place relies on our bodies to give it substance and meaning. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses that 'place is the means whereby the position of things becomes possible.'³. Merleau-Ponty also describes the body as 'the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature,

is to be intervolved in a definite environment.⁴ Our bodies give meaning to place; the very nature of the ruin as a heightened bodily experience is a powerful conductor for absence.

This felt sense of absence is possible through the body's reaction and interaction to the space that is particular to the ruin. The immeasurable sense of absence within a ruin can also be felt through the weighty presence of the remaining space and through the body's keen awareness in detecting the way jagged natural light ruminates through curious open crevices and surfaces within the building's remaining structure.

The contemporary philosopher and writer Dylan Trigg echoes this experience of visiting ruins through a phenomenological perspective where he expresses that the experience is felt through the body and the body's senses:

Our bodies respond to the texture of ruins. It is a very tactile and visual experience; from the unevenness of the floor beneath ones feet to the presence that a ruin possesses through absence. ⁵

It is through the body that sensory information such as; vision, touch, sound, smell and taste interact with the environment around us. It is 'through our senses that we receive stimuli from the environment and can convey them to the brain.'⁶ In other words, through the body, sensory information and emotional responses such as perception, we are able to react and interact with the world. Senses such as vision, sound and touch are essential for spatial experience. The human body responds to

the spatial experience of the ruin. As well as stimulating the body's senses, the ruin also stimulates the imagination.

The reason for choosing the architectural ruin as a vehicle for spatial experience is through simply being a ruin, it offers an observable tactile environment, for the investigation of the meaning and significance of absence; secondly, the use of live visual and sound recordings act as mediators and extensions of body experience and offers to communicate the perpetual transitions that occur within that space. People visit decaying buildings for many reasons, but for the purpose of specificity, this practice-led research is only focusing on the present state of one ruin in particular, the ruin of a former manor house, Nettleham Hall. The reason for this the present state of the ruin, which is in an evolving state of decay, whereby the building is allowed to follow the course of time and slowness of entropic truth. We have aimed to establish that there is a relationship between absence and place within the ruin. This relationship is not possible with the arrested ruin, because it has been preserved from decaying further. The arrested ruin becomes 'diluted,'⁷ meaning it is unable to forge a natural path with time and entropy. The types of arrested ruins in question are the heritage monuments and buildings that, although attract millions of visitors from around the world, are mere 'novelties that form a romantic perspective.'⁸

The evolving ruin possesses a certain truth. In experiencing the ruin through its present state, we aim to establish that absence has the capacity to embody the lived space and ephemerality of the ruin. The human body responds to the spatial experience of the ruin, its absence and presence. As well as stimulating the body's senses, the ruin also stimulates the imagination.

We live in a culture that values progress, and anything that is not progressive or deemed outdated is liable to fall to the waste side in a landfill, or an unoccupied building is left to decay. We strive to live in a state of utopia and progressive world, yet many of us yearn to experience the past. Perhaps this is why we have countless museums and heritage sites⁹ to visit. Our planet is steeped in rich history that reminds us of how far we have come as the human race and what we have yet to discover. Ruins are rather like museums in that we tend to walk slowly and thoughtfully through them, observing and absorbing space and objects. Though the museum is filled with fragments of interesting artefacts and facts about the past, we can only imagine what that particular past must have looked and felt like. The ruin in contrast often gives us nothing of artefacts and facts; it is instead an empty space. Yet, through absence and the embodiment of presence, it is full.

3. Communicating the experience

Our established relationship with a given spatial surrounding is not just confined to the body and awareness of the senses, we are also able to reflect and imagine. This is an important facet of the relationship between the research context and practice, and how it might mediate a holistic interpretation of the experience of Nettleham Hall, into an outcome that resonates through the body as well as the sub-conscious:

The human being is distinguished from other animals by the capacity of reflection and quality of human emotion and draws meaning from the body and mind but also from the experience of place in an interactive way: the whole environment influences the perception we have of it and

in turn, we also influence the environment in a continuously dynamic interaction.¹⁰

Addressing the second part of the research question, *how does one communicate absence through lens-based media and saxophone sound recordings*, has been approached chiefly through empirical study. The visual and sound responses as an experiential inquiry are key to the communication of absence, its presence and the phenomenologically experienced ruin.

The Live film footage recorded by Clem communicates time, duration and the ephemeral; a visual trace and expression of the felt experience of absence. In its purest most functional form, lens based media captures and records the dynamics of light. Light is in a constant state of flux, it is reflective and luminous one moment, shadowy and spectral the next, 'light remains the ultimate ephemeral element that actively shapes and colours our experience of the world'.¹¹ Siegfried Kracauer describes film as a 'series and sequence of movement, therefore more able to achieve a higher synthesis of life as it represents reality as it evolves in time.'¹² Giles Deleuze echoes Kracauer where he describes the notion of time in the cinematic image simultaneously, as past and present.

In addition to responding to the space of Nettleham Hall, the film footage is also a response to Annie's live recordings of the saxophone which transform the sound of natural elements that are unique to the Hall. Annie's belief is that through playing a saxophone she can produce intuitive knowledge through experiential and experimental improvisation. This produces sound work that directly connects to the concept, idea and inhabits the 'space' in which it is being played. Although the

practice is based on western musical theory, when working in a collaborative way no prior music score is devised or musical key signature considered.

for the instrument is only part of a larger consciousness that transcends the mere means of an instrument or instruments - what is required is that the new creative improviser must have absolute ability to instantaneously organise sound, silence and rhythm with the whole of his or her creative intelligence - the improviser's total life experience is drawn from, including faculties of right reasoning and the make up of his or her psychological and physiological existence - all of these factors determine what is actually being expressed at the moment of conception and creation - thus, at each instant.¹³

The visual and sound that arose from this space are a reflection on its usage; this usage was obvious from the remaining structure we refer to as a *trace* and arose from what was left. At the time of playing the saxophone and of recording film footage we were only aware of the space and the need to visually and sonically reflect this, giving a voice to what was and is there.

Notes

¹ Our research is conducted using the methodology of practice-led research. Barrett and Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts*. (I B Tauris & Co LTD, 2010); Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: An inquiry into visual arts*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2010).

This is researching through praxis the continued and on-going production of creative works that are critically and reflexively analysed in conjunction with a public exhibition and written thesis which forms the requirements of an MA by Research in Art, (Sullivan, 2010).

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th ed., s.v. "word."

³ Maurice Merleau Ponty: *The perception of Phenomenology*, Trans. Colin smith (London: Routledge, 2006), 284.

⁴ Merleau Ponty: *The perception of Phenomenology*, 96.

⁵ Dylan Trigg, "Architecture and Nostalgia in the Age of Ruin," *academia.edu*: accessed July 4, 2104, doi: 208447.

⁶, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th ed., s.v "sensory."

⁷ Dylan Trigg, introduction to *The Aesthetics of Decay* (Peter Lang, 2006), IV-IV

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ A heritage site is generally a building and/or location that is deemed of special value and worthy of conservation. The governing body of a township, county, province, state or country will designate a building/location as important to the cultural heritage of a community.

¹⁰ Maria João Durão, *Embodied Space: A Sensorial Approach to Spatial Experience*,

Propulsion & Energy Sciences International Forum: SPESIF-2009. AIP Conference Proceedings, Volume 1103. AIP Conference Proceedings, Volume 1103, Issue 1, p.399-406. http://www.astrosociology.org/Library/PDF/Durao_SPESIF2009.pdf (accessed 15 January 2015)

¹¹ Sofia Borges, *Liquid Spaces: Scenography, Installations and Spatial Experiences*. (Gestalten, Berlin 2015), 61.

¹² Siegfried Kracuer, *Theory of Film: The redemption of Physical Reality*. (Oxford University Press, 1960), 41.

¹³ Ishmael Wadado Leo Smith. *notes (8 pieces) source a new world music: creative music*. (Corbett vs. Dempsey and The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago on the occasion of the exhibition: Wadada Leo Smith, Ankhramation: The Language Scores, 1967-2015 October 11 - October 29, 2015)

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