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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le texte qui suit, je présente mon projet de recherche dans lequel j'explore le potentiel narratif de projections d'images en mouvement à travers un dispositif d'installation. J'y décris mon processus artistique en relation avec mon approche du dessin, du film sur pellicule et de la vidéo HD. Dans ce contexte de production, j'expérimente la création d'une narration fragmentaire au sein d'une installation. J'explore également les limites de la représentation d'un lieu identitaire et de ma relation avec les phénomènes naturels qui s'y rattachent. Enfin je développe et fictionnalise ce que je nomme *une archive générative* de matériaux basés sur ma relation à ce site. Ce texte introduit également mon intérêt pour la faillibilité des systèmes organisationnels tels que la famille, la nation et les interventions technologiques instaurées pour répondre à des phénomènes naturels.

Dans le premier chapitre, je décris d'abord mon projet de création, *Isthmus*, en lien avec ma relation à ce lieu (situé sur la côte de la Nouvelle-Écosse) et les différents aspects narratifs, historiques et familiaux qui se rattachent à celui-ci. Je suis également amenée à questionner la nature et la fragilité des prétentions d'appartenance de ma famille à cet endroit qui se sont développées à partir de l'ensemble des histoires racontées. Le projet *Isthmus* émerge au croisement de la production d'un contre-discours narratif établi à partir d'archives personnelles et de celui du développement d'une méthodologie de recherche qui se nourrit de références et d'emprunts à l'art conceptuel et aux méthodes scientifiques.

Dans le chapitre deux, je situe ma recherche artistique dans la perspective de l'art contemporain et en rapport à certaines influences historiques (romantiques, surréalistes et conceptuelles) qui ont marqué ma recherche et mes méthodes de travail. Dans le chapitre trois, la narration est présentée comme un élément fragmentaire, ouvert et instable dans mon processus créatif. J'explore la narration comme un «sous-produit» de ma démarche et développe une série de fictions autonomes et complémentaires émergeant de mon expérimentation avec les données de l'endroit. D'autre part, les œuvres émergeant de ma recherche sont produites dans un contexte où la matérialité de l'image en mouvement est en transition, suite aux avancées technologiques et au déclin de certains médias et j'y décris l'impact qu'ont apporté ces changements sur mon travail. Le chapitre finale réunit des notes liées plus spécifiquement aux œuvres qui émergent de cette recherche. J'y décris également des procédés technologiques employés pour créer les images, les sons et les dessins présentés dans le projet de cette exposition.

Mots-clés : image narrative, installation, projection d'image en mouvement, pellicule image analogue, archive générative, fragment narratif, image photochimique, fiction archival.

ABSTRACT

In the following paper I present my current research project in which I explore the narrative potential of moving image projections in installative space. I describe an artistic process of working with drawings, analogue film and HD video in which; I experiment with the potential and limits of creating a fragmentary narrative within an installation, I explore the limits of representation of my relationship with the natural phenomena and narrative past of a single site on the Atlantic coast, and I accumulate and fictionalize what I term a generative archive of material I have accumulated and created based on this relationship. Though my research has been an exploration of my relationship to a specific site, the exhibition is more broadly about the instability of the received ideas about belonging to a place and home, as well as the claims to a particular terrain due to anecdotal narratives of the duration of habitation there. The text introduces my work's interest in the fallibility of story and of human systems such as family, nation, and technological interventions built to respond to natural phenomena.

In the first chapter I describe how my research project *Isthmus* is based on my relationship to a site on the coast of Nova Scotia, and the narrative qualities and historical anecdotes of this site.. I question the nature of how my family claims of belonging to this place operate through stories we tell, and the fallibility of this claim of belonging. Through repeating of family stories, elaborating, fictionalizing and expanding upon it in my research project that I continue and question the nature of my connection to this place and the extent to which it can be represented or communicated in a work of art. The corpus of artworks assembled with documents from the site becomes a historical and bodily continuity of the presence and the narratives of my family. The *Isthmus* project emerges at the intersection of a personal archive counter-narrative and a methodology of enquiry that mimic and pastiche conceptual borrowings from social scientific and scientific methods.

In chapter two establish the art historical and contemporary art context of my artistic research. I describe the context and site of my research and discuss its historical, ecological and metaphorical status in my artistic practice. I describe the interests and influence of romantic, surrealist and conceptual art on my methods and the art historical points of reference in which I am working, ranging from treatment of the passage of time and its traces by Walter Benjamin and André Breton in the early 20th century to the treatment of place and modes of enquiry in conceptual art in the 1970's.

INTRODUCTION

In the following paper I endeavour to introduce my current research project in my artistic practice. My graduate exhibition is based on my relationship to a site on the coast of Nova Scotia where I grew up, and the narrative qualities and historical anecdotes of this site. My research project and final exhibition are named *Isthmus*, after the geographical land formation on which my installation is based. In my project I worked from a set of questions and from these questions, I created films, videos and drawings. I questioned the nature of how my family claims of belonging to this place operate through stories we tell, and how we claim it as belonging to us in return. I am interested the fallibility of this claim of belonging, how fragile such a time-limited claim is and how it is time-limited and whose disappearance are contingent on the passage of time. It is through the repeating of family stories, that my connection to this place, however fragile, is continued. It is this claim or connection that I repeat - elaborating, fictionalizing and expanding upon it in my research project. I am making out of my relationship to the anecdotes of the place, and to the phenomenon of the isthmus, a continuation of this tenuous connection to it. I am anticipating and marking its disappearance after my generation. My intention is to produce artwork out of an investigation into the effects on me of the stories and phenomena of the place and the status of such effects. The works created during

my research have emerged from questioning and reworking these elements and my relationship to them. The project has resulted in a number of new narratives and works based in film, video and drawing. In the following text I describe the context, narratives and methods that influenced my current research project in my artistic practice.

In chapter one I introduce the conceptions of the Isthmus with which I worked throughout my research: as a narrative site invested with historical grand narratives as well as family anecdotes, as a Benjaminian "outmoded" space, as a confluence of natural forces and systems to measure and question, as a system that corresponds to my proposition of a fragile system of belonging through narrative, and finally as an extension of the romantic conceits in my practice towards ruins and nature.

Chapter two outlines the context of my work as it relates to antecedent art movements and as well as current tendencies I share in contemporary art. I discuss the creation my work based on my treatment of my relationship to place. I link this process with earlier 20th century approaches to anachronism, and the passage of time in landscape and the communication of information in certain conceptual art. I elaborate on the traces and questions from previous art movements, ranging from early 20th century avant-garde to conceptual art, that

remain close at hand as reference points while I work. I attempt to describe how they nourish and frame many concerns in my work yet how the questions and situation of the present day distinguishes my work from the aims of these earlier artists. I relate my current project to two contemporary artists whose work resonates with concerns in my practice.

In chapter three I discuss my practice in specifics that I hope will illuminate the inner workings of my methods and process. These are often contradictory and illogical tendencies, curiosities or pleasures, which I am nurturing within my practice. Certain tendencies are directly related to views I hold of the status of the cinematic image at this point in time or firm convictions I entertain regarding the reasons my process has developed out of both performative and artisanal aspects to filmmaking. The temporality of the cinematic image in the installation, and within my process is discussed at length. In chapter four, I introduce and provide an overview of the major themes at work in the artworks in the installative exhibition. This final section provides notes from my creative process and a brief discussion on the principal artworks of my final exhibition. I also suggest ways in which this project impacts my future work and the role it my research has played in the development of my practice. I close by rounding out a discussion of the representation of the temporality of the past by some mention of the possibility of a question of the future.

CHAPTER 1

THE ISTHMUS PROJECT

1.1 The Isthmus Project

"These fragments I have shored against my ruin."

T.S Eliot, *The Wasteland*

"Everything happens as though the universe were a tremendous memory."

Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*

The *Isthmus* project began one day when I read that a body of water where I grew up and where my family has lived a few centuries, has the highest potential for wave resonance on the earth's surface due to its unique form and its spectacularly high tides. (Duff, G.F.D,(1970), p. 1708). Wave resonance¹ is said to destabilize some materials and structures, and in some cases, to cause them to collapse. This information triggered two years of research into the scientific, historical and ecological history and status of this site. As I gathered and

1

Wave resonance causes the tides in the Bay of Fundy to be among the highest in the world, however I associate the reputed destructive potential of wave resonance due to my introduction to the principle through anecdotes about bridges and other materials which disintegrate when a specific wavelength is reached. It is rumoured that any material has its own resonant point of collapse.

researched this place, I also wrote down the anecdotes of family stories, (fragments of stories repeated in the same words over and over in my family) which took place here. I wanted to gather them in parallel with the grand narratives about the place. I wanted to include the family stories; the father who drowns in the bay whilst fishing, the family dispersed from poverty, a family house demolished to sanitize a historical site. I wanted to see what work I could produce if I treated these family anecdotes, as a way to maintain our presence and belonging to that place and as a system in and of itself.

The idea of the potential for wave resonance at the Bay of Fundy triggered my research into the natural phenomena at work in this site. I gathered numerous scientific studies on this site and its ecology, the history of the Acadian settlement and dyking systems erected into the land to keep back the bay and began to find the intersection of natural phenomena and human technological intervention in the site a potent source (or trigger) for my imagination. The site contains both anachronistic technology (the failing hand-built aboiteaux, hand-built fortifications, WW2 short-wave radio technology, and a site that has a history of violent nationalistic contestation but yet resembles a place quite unwanted and unvisited. The area is a windswept, stark and largely unvisited place, vulnerable to a constant wind off the Bay of Fundy. The overall lack of interest in the place and the limit activity there in the present day, contrasts with

the relatively dense historical activity that took place there. Indeed the dialectic against late capitalist triumphalism has been supplanted by a dispersed sensation of technological inadequacy to meet the rising sea levels from the environmental deterioration that threaten to overtake the lower elevations of the site.

The claims of belonging through anecdote and story are themselves a kind of human system as tenuous and temporary as many other more official systems on the site. My project takes an interest in a range of human interventions in this site. The premise of my research was to question what artworks would arise from this assertion. I sought out what is fallible, unstable or paradoxical in these interventions: a series of aboiteaux systems, a fort, a shortwave radio transmitter, to draw out characteristics in common with my family's presence there. Acadian systems of aboiteaux are in decline along the coastline, irreproducible with 21st century technology. The French fortress that appears in the installation was attacked and taken by the English in 1755. On this site my grandfather's family lived in the only house left standing at the fort. Antennae that tower over the marsh and face the bay of Fundy are the only shortwave antenna in Canada, part of the war effort to establish communications between North America and Europe during the second world war. The saline water in the dyked soil causes the RF radio waves to bounce higher and longer, ensuring a

more stable broadcast, but the land is at risk from rising sea levels². The Second World War radio technology is passing into obsolescence, and the fort is in a preserved state of ruin. It is this concentration of disparate installations in the landscape, systems built, at risk, crumbling and my family stories in the midst of them, which attracts and compels me in the place.



Figure 1.1. Jen Leigh Fisher, *Landscape Conceit* (2011) super8 film, 3:40

The systems of this place are up against the inevitable and disinterested natural forces such as the tide and the inevitable erosion and deterioration of time. Disappearance and location are not the only shared characteristics here. The physical systems of the place co-exist in overlapping temporal durations in the anticipated future. I sought potential resonance and dissonance between the story fragments of my family and what I would refer to as narrative elements on the site. The motivation of my research is grounded in the questioning of the relationships that I sense, imagine and propose between them all and the

² Patrick Thibodeau. (2010) lead technician, Radio Canada International, Interview recorded November 7. Sackville, New Brunswick.

intrusive effect of this on me. The result is that I consider the fragility of a man-made system a narrative fragment, and treat it on par with the family story of drowning of a fisherman. I treat the affective charge of family stories like data. I imagine the poetic charge of system weaknesses as story fragments.

As a result of this initial research, I created what I call a generative archive. This personal archive consists of scientific reports, studies of the waves in the bay and their effects on the soil there, historical maps, historical documents on the human settlement there, interviews with technicians at the short-wave radio station, and interviews with family members. A generative and wishful archive, its fallibility targeted, yields a great affective accumulation, an excess of affect that I undertake and pretend to measure. I am creating drawings, sound recordings, films and videos to convey this accumulated affect.

This project takes a place and its characteristics, its built structures, its natural and artificial systems as its point of departure. But this work does not seek to represent, transpose or map the real place at all. In fact the space is explored with little concern for accurate representation of its spatial relations. Instead it is represented through how I imagine and remember it, through how I film it, through how I render it as an *elsewhere* that is febrile and dynamic in the far away location in which I live. This results in a compression of the area into one

very tight composite of its narrative locations-connotative places. A shifting, dynamic composite that is under pressure from the contradictory imaginary notions I extract, impose and project on it, in addition to the tension that purposeful inaccuracy can create.

1.2 Context – Generative Archive

“The archive is (...) the mass of the non-semantic inscribed in every meaningful discourse as a function of its enunciation; it is the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech.”³

Instead of treating the materials in my generative archive with particular scientific rigor, I treat them as sources for my own imaginary. There is an irresistible evocative power for me in the facticity of these materials and documents. I feel at once emboldened, contrary and absurd in the extent to which I am not at all faithful to the scientific veracity with which this place and its systems are represented. In other words, I have fictionalized, not the material, but my relationship to it. The illusory and unstable assertion that I am entitled to do so arises from my belief that there is some inconsistent authenticity to my claims of belonging to this place and its belonging to me or my family in return. Gathering the materials of the archive may provide legitimacy to my project that is then undermined by my paradoxical

³ Agamben, Giorgio. (1989). *The Archive and Testimony*. In *The Archive*. Mereweather, Charles (Ed.) (Work originally published in 1989). Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press., 38.

fictionalizing treatment of it. There is no code or principle according to which the material of the archive is ordered, arranged or presented aside from associative relationships I perceive between its constitutive elements. This is an associative and personal process of abstraction, whose absurd functioning only generates more of its self. If it is an archive it is a generative one. Whether or not it serves a mnemonic function is an unresolved question in my research and if so, whose history might it serve? The question remains open, as it is an archive without authority; rather it is the unstable material of a process of imagination.

The generative archive is a physical and metaphorical continuity. The physical presence of the corpus of artworks assembled with documents from the site, serves as a referent to the presence of my own body, and even my familial presence in this place. I have created a tangible, physical manifestation of my claims to this place. It becomes a historical and bodily continuity of the presence and the narratives of my family there. An archive is under a kind of pressure, this pressure I am observing and testing out in my process. It is possible that the archive stands in for what is in the process of disappearing. It is the very pressure that hardens and crystallizes the project of an archive. But what I am learning is that this pressure is constitutive, as it distinguishes the archive's nature from that of a collected pile of artist source material, or even a *merz*-like accumulation from the everyday.

1.3 Context Narratives

The *Isthmus* project emerges at the intersection of a personal archive counter-narrative and a methodology of enquiry that mimic and pastiche conceptual borrowings from social scientific and scientific methods. My interest in this contemporaneous moment, in the spring of 2011, is the transformation of technology I use in my work. This point in the photochemical image's passage into obsolescence, itself a time interval of which one can only acknowledge its having begun and anticipate its end. What Chris Marker called "...media [that] once shone with the anticipation of the century to come, they now radiate its afterimage, the 'immense, interminable fade' of the 20th century", (Beckman & Ma, 2008, p.17) but his the shining anticipation he speaks of could equally refer to the promise of the broadcast technology on the *Isthmus* site. The resonance between technologies in the throes of passage into obsolescence may be entirely imaginary on my part, but it provoked associations that warranted a closer look at the site with my film cameras.

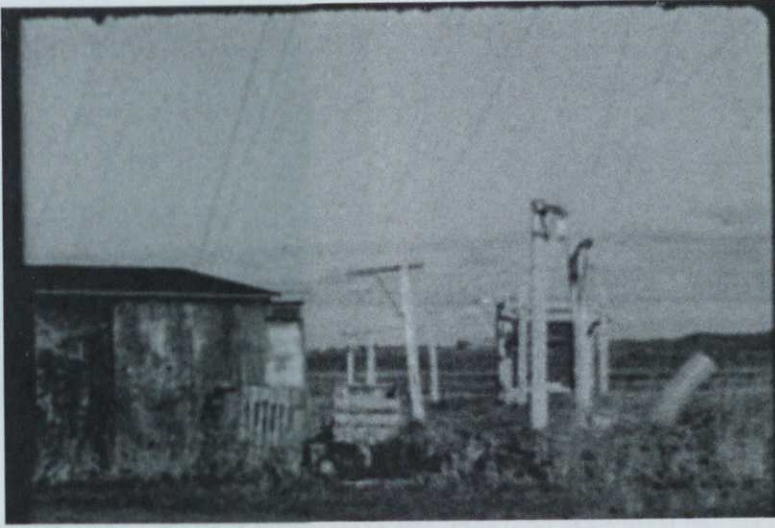


Figure 1.2 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Broadcast Array* (2008), super8 film, 4:30

The changing status of technologies of the moving image are a direct and incontrovertible narrative, aesthetic and technical context of my work. Though I treat this as a contemporaneous given, the project is also in dialogue with specific artworks that precede it. An awareness of the after-image of these artworks and what I understand to be their methodologies is a constant as I work. These methods function like terms of reference for what I employ and reject in my process.

As this research considers my relationship to this place, it inevitably takes up with the passage of time as well. More specifically the nature of the representation of the passage of time, its effects, the representation of elements out of time (anachronism, anticipated outcomes) and the narrative charge that memory inscribes on a place where a great deal of human activity has occurred.

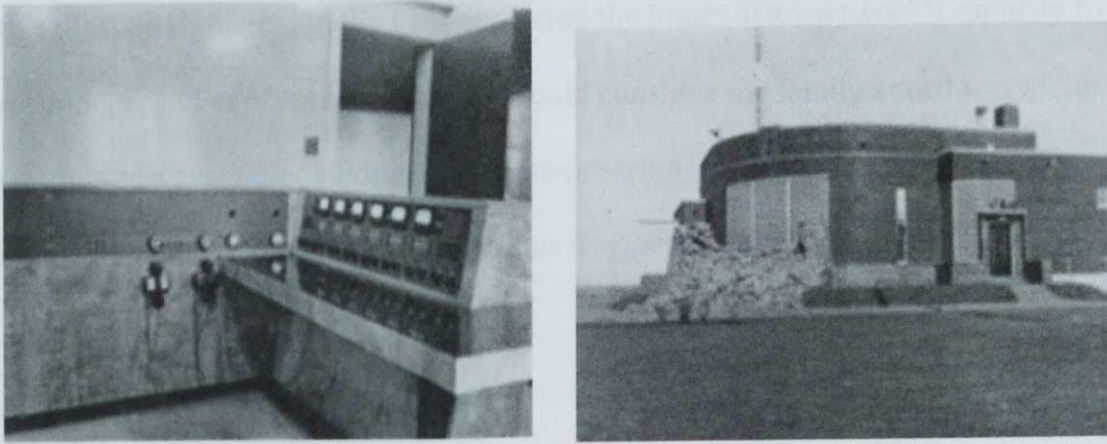


Figure 1.3. Jen Leigh Fisher, *My Dear Ruin* (2011), HD video loop of archival images of the RCI Short Wave Radio Station, Sackville, NB, 1:45.

The first sources and references with which I worked when I began this project were Walter Benjamin, André Breton and Tacita Dean. My references have evolved over my research but a discussion of this seems essential to my explanation of my research and its point of departure. I use principles of diachronous montage in my generative archive without the revolutionary dialectic of Walter Benjamin. I have a fascination for the uncanny in anachronism and outmoded spaces without André Breton's hope of shock and emancipation.

I play with the aesthetic of borrowed scientific language of conceptualism to convey the effect of natural phenomenon on human beings but do not shares in its project. The *Isthmus* project is about the passage of time. I am asking what is the nature of that which is disappearing here, and what is the nature and limit of

this disappearance? Finally I am exploring the limits of an artwork's capacity to respond to and express any of this. I would consider the family anecdotes of the Isthmus as a system of belonging or remembering that I would research and reflect a system in parallel with the other fragile systems in that place.

Chapter 2

Context Methods

2.1 Fictionalizing a perception of place: sensory performance

The characters and gestures I performed in my previous films were based on my sensory relationship to a given place or situation, or my characters would respond to sensory stimuli, constructing what was to me an illogic in my conception of my sensory reciprocity with a place. But when I analyze the conceits, attitudes and beliefs of the characters themselves, I realized that the character believes she has a sensory response to her environment that is exceptional, unique and without the limits that may be put on others. She enacts a belief in a limitless potential within this reciprocity and its performance. I take sincere and absurd attitudes of pretence vis à vis my effect on a place or landscape and its effect on me in return. Out of this pretext I make a work. I seek out slippages, errors, and moments of dérapage that will result in effects that I do not feel I could have achieved otherwise. It is a kind of illogic or contradiction within my process. Sol Lewitt's statement "illogical judgments

create new experience" cited by Lucy Lippard (1973, p.75) describes well my faith in such contrary and irrational paths my work can take.



Figure 2.1 Jen Leigh Fisher, *New Atlantis* (2009), super 8/DV film, 3:20



Figure 2.2 Jen Leigh Fisher, *The Accidental* (2008), super8/DV film, 7:10

I realized that my character believes she possesses a sensory response to her environment that is unlike that of others, limitless in that she ignores dominant logic of causality or even public safety. For example, a woman who closes her eyes while driving across a bridge in Vancouver in response to the sounds she hears inside her car, a person who believes the sparkling foil streamers hanging above a used used-car lot are so mesmerizing, that she is in turn effecting them, and braiding them with her eyes. Or in the case of my current project, there are claims that my arrival on the isthmus has caused leaks and minor flooding in the radio station, (which occurred while I was interviewing staff there), that growing up in proximity to the RF radio waves of the aging antennae has affected my hearing sensitivity. The characters I create follow their sensory responses to their environment, instead of the cause and effect relationships

that usually inscribe our understanding of our sensory relations with the world. This may seem an oversimplification, but it is such rational causality that is the very object of my rejection and refusal when I am in performing.



Figure 2.3 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Sparklene* (2007), super8/DV, 3:30

My characters behave according to sensory responses as the basis for one's relationship to the world rather than rational causality or public laws of safety. For example in *Sparklene* (2008) the character I play fixates on a sparkling foil decoration that is strung above a used-car lot that I would visit repeatedly. In the film she expresses her belief that due to their effect on her, she is able in turn to effect a change in the foil sparkling materials themselves. She claims to a cat that she is braiding them with her gaze. The romantic poets in the early 19th century often fostered the conceit that the effect of nature on their senses was special, creating an intense and unique relationship based on sensation. This

conceit resonated for me with the attitudes my characters tend to act out in my performances. This attitude is present in my work yet I work at a point in time where perception is conceived of not through a 19th century, individual spirit encountering a sublime but governable nature but a post-modern subject who is multiple, dispersed and even fragmentary. This special status of sensations in nature could not be more different in that in my practice in 2011, it is a given that vision is embodied and contextual, formed by my understanding of embodied perception after the phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, the antecedents of the attitudes towards nature that seep into my work, that I link with antecedents of romanticism, interest me a great deal, and I pay keen attention to them as I work.

2.2 Decline and Romantic Attitudes towards Nature

I may have come to imagine the pleasure of a reciprocal relationship with materials and my body in space through Gilles Deleuze's cinema theory texts and Merleau-Ponty's theories of embodied perception but in the end I identify the conceit of my characters as an attitude of specialness that is romantic. I associate this romantic conceits towards nature and the idea of cultural and economic decline in art history. In my previous film *New Atlantis* (2009), I worked with a place that was in a state of decline due to excess and speculation: an aged drive-thru, bursting with flowering overgrowth and slated for demolition for the construction of condominiums. In the film I futilely attempt

an intervention with birds, while a condo tower is constructed in the background, blocking the view to the ocean. I was interested in this non-place as a site of deterioration of artificial and natural structures. I treat the city as though it is already a ruin, an anticipated ruin. My current research uses a similar process as a point of departure in another place also in a state of decline. What is different in this project, however, is that this process has generated an archive of materials from which I have created a narrative that will function through multiple fragments in the installative space of the gallery. I am interested in the fallibility of story and of human systems such as family, nation, and technological responses built into the landscape to respond to natural forces. In *The Accidental* (2008) my character brings about an accident by closing her eyes to listen to the sounds of her car. She dissociates and tests herself to see how long she can drive on a bridge with her eyes closed. This work is not about an emancipatory, sensory relationship with a valorized and heroic natural landscape. My work is at times absurd and playful but there is always an assumption of a work responding within a compromised human relationship to the natural world.



Figure 2.4 Jen Leigh Fisher, *The Accidental* (2008), super8, 7:10

I made several films during a time of what I assumed to be an economic collapse. I was interested in why the fantasy of ever further collapse of social and economic systems had such currency in the artists and community around me in Vancouver. This was not simply west-coast back-to-the-land, start over again in harmony with nature rhetoric. It was an atmosphere of fear and awe filled discussions about how late-capitalism and its project were devolving in the spiralling collapse of the global economic system and a mounting sense that an end of endings was nigh. I began to imagine how the visions, or just how vibrant and fervent the energy of anticipation could be in my work, even if that which was anticipated were collapse, annihilation, and the incommunicable sense that wild nature could so fiercely and rapidly overtake us. I began dreaming of huge rolling waves that I had seen in a documentary. I was fixated on drowning narratives from my family stories and how I would go to the place where I grew up to work on all of this. When I travelled back there, I repeated in my head over

and over a phrase that I had paraphrased and wrote down in my notes from an introduction to the Merleau-Ponty essay *The Phenomenology of Perception*. "I make the horizon come into being with my eyes."⁴ I wanted to do this over and over on the isthmus and find my work in doing so.

I began by making a film where a character traces the outlines of the family house by the bay that had been demolished by the government in a super8 film called *Family Dispersed After A Drowning* (2009, 2:50). This was the first work of the Isthmus project that culminates in my graduate exhibition. I cannot resolve the contradiction in what I would call the romantic attitudes in my work with the decidedly contemporary ways of understanding the world that underpin my work. It is an attitude that is present, developed and borrowed even, but it is not adopted. I have no use for the universalizing platitudes about beauty, nature or the human spirit that romantic artists had espoused. I accept responsibility for this contradiction. I think the contradiction is full of potential and a source for the attitude of characters that are, as it is, inherently illogical.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1959). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Routledge & Kegan Paul. New York : Routledge., 80.

I am paraphrasing here from the last line of the following text : « I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment ; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished – since that distance is not one of its properties – if I were not there to scan it with my gaze».



Figure 2.5 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Famille Dispersé Après Une Noyade* (2009), 1:50

2.3 Not a rupture but a continuation

Both the ruin and anachronism function in the history of contemporary art as ciphers for the presence of the historical past in the present, and both serve as un-fixable points of discomfort and fantasy regarding the future. When I use the term ruin, I mean a place not only in a state of deterioration, but which also contains an anticipated and potential future ruin, observable in the present.

When I use the term anachronism I mean that which appears at odds and out of place with the present of the artwork or the spectator. Initially I had understood anachronism as a term invested with a psychically charged shock of the “*unheimlich*” or uncanny from my readings of Hal Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty*. In it, Foster describes a continuity from the outmoded material historicist evaluation of Benjamin to the uncanny automatons of Breton’s early work in the surrealist movement in the twenties and thirties. He describes this factor in

what he calls the "outmoded spaces" of Walter Benjamin's arcades project and André Breton's interest in flea markets and 19thc automatons and other detritus of the past. "The notion of the outmoded is developed by Benjamin from Marx, who suggests (before the fact, as it were) an uncanny compulsion to repeat at work in history." (Foster, 1993, p.218) I was attracted to potent éclat and uncanny return possible within the fixed explosive that Breton perceived as possible in the photographic image and the shudder of the outmoded machine within the mannequin like bodies of Breton's collection of automatons. This attraction is bound up in my fetishist pleasure in projectors I often use to generate images. Walter Benjamin's heterogeneous archive of *The Arcades Project* marked the transformation of the mercantile and cultural spaces of the 19th Paris arcades into an outmoded condition that represents the rapid economic and social change from a mercantilist/artisanal economy to one of mass-production-consumerism and increasingly mechanized social relations.⁵ (Benjamin, 1999, p.12) and (Foster, 2004, p.126) These texts were my first encounter with the potential for the construction of a counter-history, and counter-memory through montage. Despite my interest and research into this early 20thc project of archival montage, my project neither functions with the dialectic project of the early 20th c of archival montage towards the construction

⁵ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin write in their Introduction to their translation of *The Arcades Project* (1999) regarding the Walter Benjamin's assembly of heterogeneous elements that "...here at a distance from what is normally meant by progress, is the ur-historical, collective redemption of lost time (..) embedded in the spaces of things." (Benjamin, 1999, p.12)

of a counter-history nor does it continue a conceptualist's "prise de position" to evacuate interpretive content from dematerialized art work.

Early in my research, I began to seek out the momentary contraction of a failing past into the present within the transition of the moving image technology of cinema from analogue machinery to digital. In *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster describes how André Breton sought out images of the obsolescence of 19th century technology, (such as automatons and steam engines etc.), to undermine the calamitous cultural damage wrought by technological advance. Breton's surrealist project was supposed to subvert the dehumanizing triumph of reason over the human spirit by industrial technology through the triggering of convulsive returns in the psyche, allowing at least temporary liberation, through encounters with the uncanny.⁶ What is the status of these ruins and anachronisms when invoked in 2011, long after such dialectic has long been exhausted? The ruin and the uncanny of the anachronistic and the outmoded influenced what I find to be a productive tension between the contrasted human and natural systems of the Isthmus.

⁶ Hal Foster explicitly suggests that the surrealist project "...implicitly pledged the re-enchantment of a disenchanted world, of a capitalist society made ruthlessly rational." (Foster, 2004, p. 19)



Interior view of lost and abandoned boat

.Aerial view of lost boat of Donald Crowhurst.

Figure 2.6 Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron* (2000), 16mm film stills, 7:00
Internet Images Available: <http://cubittartists.org.uk/index.php?section=6> and
<http://beta.tate.org.uk/art/work/P78389> July 18, 2011

Sometimes artworks reach me first as an anecdote. The first time I heard of British artist Tacita Dean (b. 1965) it was linked to an anecdote. She had made a work about giant concrete sound mirrors that were built on the cliffs of Dover coast in the UK in the 1930's. It was hoped that these large concave concrete surfaces would assist in the acoustic amplification of British radar systems listening for German ships. However they did not work. This minimal information had a powerful effect on me. First, there is the extraordinary notion of a sound mirror for sound waves, being built on such a scale. Second, there is the complex charge of what is attempted and which fails and leaves all the traces and vestiges of this hope, attempt and failure. Thirdly I wondered about the condition of these sound mirrors and what the period of time since the point where they were acknowledged to not work and now, how have they transformed into their abandonment and *désuétude*. The uselessness of a thing overwhelms its nature with the passage of time.



Figure 2.7 Tacita Dean, *Sound Mirrors* (1999), 16mm film, 7:00, Retrieved July 18, 2011 from <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue5/futuretechnology.htm>. July 18, 2011.

Tacita Deans film *Sound Mirrors* (1999) resonates with my growing sense of the Isthmus as a nexus of natural forces; wave resonance potential, enormous tides, contracting and expanding marshlands remaking the coastline each spring, rising sea levels, in contact with the man-made, radiation emitting short-wave radio wavelengths as well, in the continual sound waves across the saltwater-soaked land. Something about Dean's work about the sound mirrors corresponded with what I felt to exist at the Isthmus. The conflation of the fallibility of human interventions into natural phenomenon brings the inexorable impact, and mark of the passage of time into striking relief. The more I learned about Tacita Dean's work the more I saw it as relevant to my

own. Not only does she work with anachronism and film, but she works with contextual narratives that enclose and tie her works together.

In the sound mirrors piece there is a confluence of three major sources of interest for me: anachronism, the effect on sound waves by natural forces and the narrative potential of the outmoded. In 2008, I made a performative video about the relief of failure. In it I demonstrate to an imagined industrial video spectator, a demonstration of appropriate facial expressions and sounds of both admonishment and empathy for errors that have occurred-been found in the test images of magnetic parts at IBM. I am very interested in the potential of errors and failures. I am drawn to exploration of them through artworks. I am not looking for weaknesses in technology to exploit. Random errors are interesting but failures of hoped for results carry a potent narrative and temporal charge that is bound up in our usual reception of such things. We frequently acknowledge failure and then move on quickly, focus on not making the same mistake again: one is urged to move on as quickly as possible, focus on the future actions.

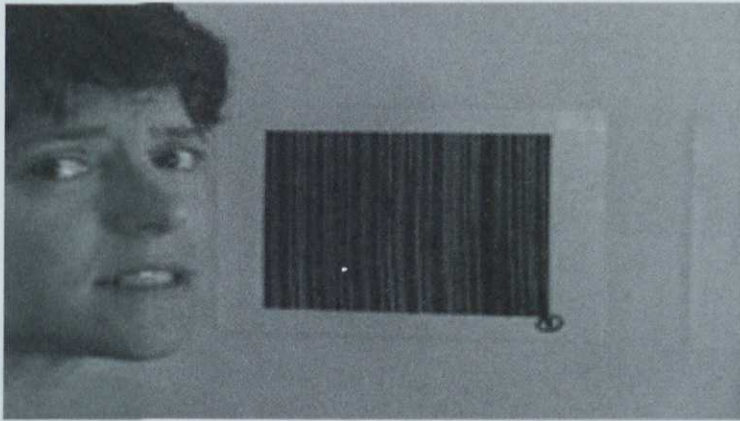


Figure 2.8 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Failed Product* (2007), DV, 1:40

However, some failures are worth working over, often they are beautiful or hold some intrinsic special quality that successes cannot. There is a relief that is discharged by failures in many structures and systems that are meticulously designed to allow no error. I refer not only of Fordist-Taylorist industrial and high-tech production, but also a project that is invested with collective desire, hope and confidence in progress that becomes, with time, out of date, unworkable, no longer functional. When I mapped out a schema of my practice. I drew several arrows that point towards the final element in the schema; instability appearing and disappearing in my subject. For me this is what moving image duration in my work could potentially do, when they work well.



Figure 2.9. Simon Starling, *Shedboatshed* (Mobile Architecture No. 2) (2005) Retrieved July18, 2011 from <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2005/simonstarling.htm>

Figure 2.10 Simon Starling, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), 16mm film, Retrieved July18, 2011 from <http://www.mousse magazine.it/articolo.mm?id=20>

There is an artist who works with anachronism in his work with very different strategies, but I find his deft handling of instability is intriguingly poetic and absurd. Simon Starling (b. 1967) is a UK artist who works with technology and the energy required to transform materials. In *Shedboatshed* (Mobile Architecture No. 2) (2005), he created a work by taking apart a shed, turning it into a boat loaded with the remains of the shed, and travelled down the Rheine to a museum where the work would be exhibited and reassembled the shed. This work engages a conceptual strategy that Jan Verwoert names “staging an idea” (2006, p.12). This artist’s treatment of failure and the natural elements are resonant with my interest in what is transforming at the Isthmus. The

temporality of ambition and its implicit other; failure, are taken up with absurd and minimal playfulness in Starling's material transformations. This is most explicit, in my view, in the work *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), a seven-minute slide show documenting a three-hour voyage on a Scottish lake in a small boat powered with a small steam engine. Starling breaks pieces of wood from the boat and feeds them into the steam engine's burner, slowly causing the boat to inevitably sink by the same means that propels it forward. The boat eventually sinks and Starling swims to shore in his life-vest.

Both artists are reflecting on failed modernist discourses of progress and its constituent aspirations that I would suggest hold both a narrative and poetic charge. Simon Starling works with ecological and economic consequences of such failures. Dean works with the metaphors of modernist technological master of nature. Starling and Dean both make work that has elaborate contextual intricacy, information that intensifies the power of the work. The artworks operate as fragments, which are part of a larger interconnected set of variables, whether it is ecological information about a material or technology or historical narratives of a place. I am interested in this fragmentary quality. The work does not provide wholeness and a total experience. These practices serve as a fruitful counterpoint to more fashionably democratic, accessible and immersive spectacles in recent media art. I am interested in making sense of

the world around me through study of how things do not work more than I am interested in knowing how they do work. The aboiteaux system that keeps the bay back from the Isthmus, built by hand by Acadian farmers, later taken over by the government, and inadequately duplicated despite their high-tech methods, is failing slowly. This system will slowly erode with time, exacerbated by rising sea levels in the future. Success has a short half-life. Error and failure has a long, long duration and traces trail into the future a great distance ahead.

2.4 Borrowing from conceptualism's borrowing from scientific enquiry

The second stage of my process is born of enquiry that is conceptual in nature. However, I contradict the ethos of conceptualist methods in that I have no interest in lifting all interpretation, emotion or illusion from the final work. Instead I am interested in intensifying the affective contents of data from this place, I seek to exacerbate it and reveal it in its potent presence within my generative archive. In describing the use of scientific methodology by artists Anne Moeglin-Delcroix writes an artwork "... reintroduces the ancient definition of science: as the outcome of description and taxonomy arising from wonder, the primal driving force of knowledge...". (1997, p.112) This wonder is characteristic and condition that I am seeking out in the materials I gather. It is the natural forces of the site and the complexity of the man-made interventions there, which

trigger wonder as a response. It is perhaps the part of science I can relate to, and why if my concentration is on this part of scientific enquiry, over say, more empirical evidence and causal observation and conclusion, I feel so free in undermining and twisting scientific or historical data for my own irrational and fictional purposes.

My research into the natural forces and phenomena of the site and my affective responses to documents expressed as dry scientific data started me thinking about resonances with my experience of the text-based artworks of Robert Barry (b. 1936), the exterior falling films of Bas Jan Ader (b. 1942). I began my project with the notion that I would consider the family anecdotes of the Isthmus as a system of belonging or remembering that I would research and reflect a system in parallel with the other fragile systems in that place. I was curious about the maintenance of the inadequate systems on the Isthmus and I structured my enquiry into the place on those grounds. I asked myself what might be generated if I considered myself responsible for the upkeep of such fragile and intangible system as a cluster of anecdotes and story fragments. I asked what might result if I were to conceive of the upkeep of such as system in parallel with the upkeep of other fragile systems such as the crumbling aboiteaux that keep the sea back, the aging and leaking WWII short-wave radio station and the upkeep of the unvisited historical site where the family house

was torn down. This upkeep is essentially tasks meant to stave off the deleterious effects of natural forces or the passage of time.

I gathered quasi-scientific data by posing metaphorical questions and assembling montages in order to re-fictionalize this information and generate films. I used forms of enquiry of an ecological or anthropological documentary or study. I interviewed and photographed the maintenance activities at the historical site and the short wave radio station employees. I used conceptual enquiry methods of mimicking ecological or ethnographic disciplines to establish material to which I could react and create a fictionalized response. These responses became the work. I have collected scientific studies on the contraction and expansion of the marsh of Isthmus land, historical documents, photographs, maps and interviews from the local historical society, and the archives of the local university and short wave radio station. As these documents accumulate in my studio, I create the recordings, photographs, drawings and videos in response to them. In my installation I am presenting a selection from this volume of material. These disparate elements I have collected are added to the core of the personal archive, the anecdotes repeated by my family. Assembled together in this way I then respond to the correspondences and affective resonances that I perceive and experience working within this archive that I thus name a generative one. In response to

quoted anecdotes, or legitimate scientific studies of the effects of sea level rise I add a short film that fictionalizes further the effects of the Isthmus, using sound recordings and images created there.

2.5 Data, the Imaginary and Romantic Conceptualism

The Isthmus project was set in motion the day I learned that scientific researchers deemed that the Bay of Fundy had the highest potential for wave resonance on the earth's surface, due to its unique form and its exceptionally high tides. I began to wonder about what I experienced as the natural phenomena of that place and what is for me a mnemonic charge that comes from an accumulation of historical and personal narrative that took place there. The Bay of Fundy has a local reputation for its wildness. Its tides are among the highest in the world. Unlike the rest of the western coast of Nova Scotia, the water temperature barely changes with the seasons. It is, in short, an inhospitable body of water for human activity, despite its ecological significance. The bridge of land that joins mainland Nova Scotia to the rest of Canada is mostly covered with marshlands that contract and expand naturally at the entry point into the sea. The Acadian settlers dyked this land in the 17th and 18th centuries, transforming it into cultivatable farmland. As I researched the potential of the natural phenomena of this place, I began to question the nature and intensity of my identification with it. I was distracted by intrusive thoughts

about this place and its stories. I began to consider what might be generated if I were to attempt to work with what to me were un-representable, imperceptible and invisible forces, relationships and transformations, I perceived to be at work in this place. I began to draw "measurements" of the effect on me of the accumulation in this place. I began to imagine my work coming from the intense action of these forces that I would somehow make if not visible, the at least perceptible.

The inconsistencies and romantic attitudes in my work led me to do a case study of the films of Bas Jan Ader when his work was discussed in connection with the term romantic-conceptualism. I watched his films and found potent examples of such a contradictory term. During this project, I cultivated as much as I was able, my own interpretation of a romantic-conceptualist attitude towards the isthmus site and its systems during my visit to research, record, interview and film there. I describe this part of my process as an adaptation of an attitude because I am not recuperating any specific method, in that I am not recreating artworks or doing a pastiche or even making specific references to previous artworks or movements. Rather than any dialectic project, the adoption of an attitude is at once incomplete, temporary, resists definiteness, and does not necessarily carry through the entire process from beginning to its end. In this way, my creative process could accommodate and in fact nurture contradiction

and juxtaposition in my work, for example the placement of measurements of tidal data alongside a fictional, effect-laden voiceover. The testing out of the degree to which the installation and more concretely, the generative archive can contain such contradictions, is my challenge and reward. This ultimately becomes part of the potent charge of the work for me.

In certain invisible and text-based works of Robert Barry, I find the question of whether the relationships between natural forces and human beings are communicable and measurable. I would argue their work attempts to do so, despite the inevitable incompleteness and inadequacy of such an attempted communication. Conceptual art frequently borrowed the language of enquiry and forms of science and social sciences, as artist attempted to present artworks stripped-bare of theatricality, interpretation or illusion. Paradoxically it is just this evocative, poetic economy of communicative means that I am drawn to in many of these works. The employment of lists, diagrams, measurements and stark concise language conveys a powerful narrative effect, despite and because of the borrowing of scientific syntax normally used to communicate data or the neutral observations of the scientist. It shows to what extent the language, no matter how dry and stripped down, carries its intensity not in its style but in the intention of the person conveying the information. An artist writing scientifically and describing the world as observed data will still create an effect

on the reader or spectator that is far different than that of a scientific text or report.

“ There is something quite close to me in space and time but is not yet known to me.”⁷
Robert Barry, 1969

This one sentence artwork above by Robert Barry has been affixed to my studio wall throughout my project because of the evocative quantity of associations the work conveys without naming any specific content. As a sentence it expresses itself with the character of a neutral, empirical observation, of data or experience that is immeasurable and imperceptible to another person. The application of scientific, neutral voice when describing mental processes of anticipation, memory or even dread. Mental processes do not lend themselves to representation. They could have been evoked, through figurative images or narrative means but what is so effective about this work is that the use of neutral observation language that seems to compress the experience of all the potential content the work could be describing, while at the same time, crystallizing my curiosity and wonder at the limitations of a sentence.

2.6 Narrative stated as information - Information stated as narrative.

⁷ I saw this work during a slideshow on conceptual art by David Tomas during a February 2010 graduate seminar at UQAM. We were shown a slide of a piece of paper and on this slide the above sentence was typed. I wrote it down carefully and have had it on my studio desk since that day. Despite my searching I have been unable to find an image of this artwork for this publication.

Frequently the content of an artwork simplified to the level of statement has an evocative effect. No matter how much a conceptual artist may have attempted to reduce any interpretive or illusory trappings from an artwork, I will often experience it as something almost magically potent. My initial interest in the films of Bas Jan Ader, was triggered by the way in which his practice was described. A professor spoke of Ader as a kind of romantic conceptualism, a characterization he decried. I found the contradiction in terms irresistible and sought out all the documentation of Ader's work I could find. Bas Jan Ader made a series of short 16mm films between 1970 and 1971, *Fall 1*, *Fall 2*, *Broken Fall (Organic)*, *Broken Fall (Geometric)* and *Nightfall*. The duration of these films range from a 24 second film that document the artist's fall from the roof of his house to a 4:16 minute film of his leaning off a platform and finally falling inside a garage like interior.

Ader claimed that his medium was gravity. Each piece reflects his research into the causal relationships of gravity on his body and within the filmed image.

However these short films are not only documentation of performances. Given how I watched them, one after the other and long after the artist has disappeared at sea, they function as films in their own right and for me they function as short narrative fragments that are parts of an unstable whole. To me, all but *Nightfall* (1971) function as narrative fragments that are rendered at

the level of statement, but a filmic statement, with all of the signifiers of the cinematic image working as potent details that serve the whole of each film. They are each independent narratives that consist of the bare minimum of a story, there is a situation, an action, and a consequence of said action. There is nothing more and nothing extraneous included in the action.



Figure 2.11 Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Organic)* (1970), 1:44, Retrieved July 18, 2011 from <http://duckfeeding.com/archives/10190,07/18/2011>.

The images often include Dutch landscape, urban picturesque canal, or cottage-like house edged by trees. There is no interpretive detail added but there is a specificity of evocative landscape detail included. Ader does not demonstrate

the effect of gravity on a rock in a bucket, or present measurements or conceptual trope images of subject matter sterilized of interpretation, narrative detail or figurative illusion. He acts within a figurative, narrative field and the camera is off as soon as the story in its simplicity and potent restraint is told.

The story of Bas Jan Ader and his work is of a piece in its influence on my work. I sought out details of his early life and biography, as well as his final artwork.. *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), was a tri-partite work that Ader had intended and organized to include a performance at a gallery in Los Angeles, a voyage by sailboat from the Atlantic coast of the US to the UK, and a performance at a gallery in London of sea shanty singing choir upon his arrival. I have been dreaming about this work in my studio, trying to track down the sheet music for the choirs who were booked to sing the songs for his send off and unlikely arrival.



Figure 2.12 Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, (1975), uncompleted, Retrieved July 18, 2011 from <http://www.patamagazine.com/?q=en/bas-jan-ader>

I have included homage to this incomplete artwork in my generative archive, based on narrative loops that thread through the story of Ader's last artwork that was not completed due to his disappearance at sea during its execution. I have included a loop of waves to stand in for the wave resonance potential in the Bay of Fundy. These ominous, wild and rolling waves were filmed on 35mm for a BBC documentary on another man who disappeared at sea, Donald Crowhurst. I found out about Crowhurst's disappearance while doing case studies on Tacita Dean and Bas Jan Ader. These waves are a cipher for looping stories that I have conflated throughout my work on the Isthmus project and that thread from the Ader going missing at sea, to the fraudulent sailor Crowhurst committing suicide

at sea, the family anecdote of my mother's grandfather drowning in the Bay of Fundy and the loss of my father. These disappearance stories, which I repeat over and over to create my spectrogram images are now interwoven in my head with the super8 film images Crowhurst filmed of himself during doomed sea voyage, in which I found him to have an uncanny resemblance to my own father, who himself disappeared in 2002.

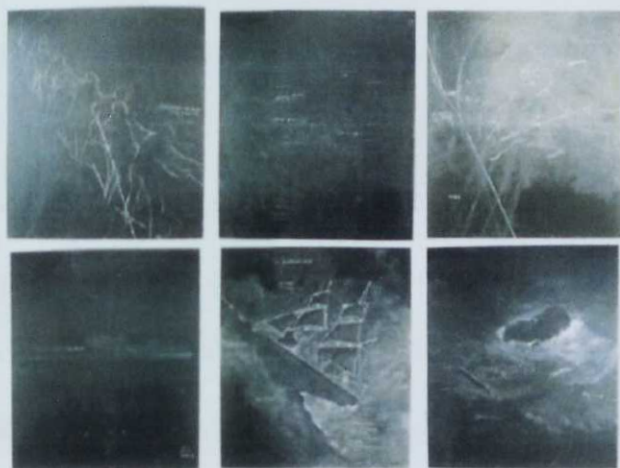


Figure 2.13 Tacita Dean, *Disappearance At Sea 1-6*, (1995)
Chalk on blackboard panels, 94.5 x 94.5 in. / 240 x 240
cm retrieved on July 18, 2011 from
http://www.artnet.com/artists/lotdetailpage.aspxlot_id=6AA0B8B75DF11BB7



Figure 2.14 film still of drowned sailor
Donald Crowhurst, retrieved July 18,
2011 from
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/apr/05/donald-crowhurst-lone-sailor>

The tales of disappearance and the sea are complicated by my learning the tale of Tacita Dean's discovery of Crowhurst's boat while making a film about him and the story, as told by Jan Verwoert that in the personal effects of Bas Jan Ader, following his disappearance, were the shipboard journals of this last voyage of Crowhurst, in which he describes his descent into madness and abandon of his

fraudulent attempt to go around the world and he finally gave up and let the sea take him. I have not seen the film *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) by Tacita Dean. I know the film and its stories only through reading about them. Looping and extensive narratives that connect artists, their ideas, their gathering and shifting through narratives become background narratives to my own process of doing the same. I do not generally want to read any artist's work through a lens of their biography, but there is little possibility for me to watch Ader's films without a consciousness of both the barbarism of his father's prosecution and murder by the Nazis and his later disappearance at sea. In the same way I am unable to watch separate Tacita Dean's work from the narratives that she herself pursued in her research for her films, whether it is the story of the fraud and death at sea of the sailor Crowhurst who Dean makes her subject, or the story of her discovery of his abandoned boat on an island as she conducted her research. These stories as well as the discover of Crowhurst journals recounting his decent into isolation and madness alone at sea in the locker of Ader after his disappearance can be kept out of my viewing of the rolling waves shot in my video. The waves are a cipher for so many stories of drowning, so much loss and even more for certain oblivion.



Figure 2.15 Bas Jan Ader, *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* (1970), 16mm film, 3:34. Retrieved July 18, 2011 from

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3652223/The-artist-who-sailed-to-oblivion.html>

Figure 2.16 Bas Jan Ader, *In Search Of The Miraculous* (1975), documentation of choir singing before Ader's departure. Retrieved July 18, 2011 from

<http://www.artslant.com/la/events/show/85917-bas-jan-ader>

When discussing emotion in Bas Jan Ader's film *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (1970), Jan Verwoert writes, "...the crying may be staged but it is not fake..." (2006, p.13) This is a very intriguing statement because I find it gets at something unresolvedly engaging about the emotion and affect when crossed with the conceptual project. This apparent contradiction is what I find my experience of Ader's work most instructive to my own. Verwoert defines conceptual art in the briefest of terms, by stating that "...it stages an idea." (2006, p.13) He posits that Ader stages the idea of a romantic individual artist on a journey towards the miraculous in his work. This staging becomes increasingly elaborate and eventually includes a tripartite artwork, the second part of which Ader never lives to complete. But this notion of staging is important, because I believe it by

passes any quibbling about scientific facticity, or even in say reporting accurately topographical representations of the Isthmus to allow for and include representations, staged representations of how I believe the place to be. It allows for a place not of inaccuracy and wilful dishonesty but of authentic and sincere, even absurd inaccuracy. To stage has a pretty wide open connotative range of significance in English. To stage an idea is absolutely tantalizing, even freer and richly connotative in its meaning.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVE, TIME AND MATERIALITY

3.1 Narrative Fragments and Temporal Durations

"By treating the temporal quality of experience as the common reference of both history and fiction, I make of fiction, history and time one single problem [...] if narrativity is to mark, organize and clarify temporal experience...". (Ricoeur, 1983, p.139)

My research works through a set of desires, questions, contradictory conclusions and romantic attitudes. I am working at the intersection of several story fragments I have heard repeated all my life, and sets of narrative fragments from various histories; of this specific site, of the medium I am employing, of the strategies I am utilizing. These constitute a context that is braided into and which envelops the work as I create and exhibit it. The stories from this place are shifting and circling around my project like after-images, like shadows. Reorienting me, they tend to lead back towards a centre that traces and retraces the loss of my own father and the disappearance of my mother's grandfather from that house. I would take to repeating over and over the account of the witness who held on while he drowned. His account had been repeated over and over in my family, in its simple wording. I am taking this narrative place as a site to work with instead of the analogous events in my own immediate family that are too emotional to portray. I am working with the metaphors of other fathers

lost at sea; other stories that recount searching for them, other accounts of the cause of their disappearance. Repeating them wears down the intensity and disbelief that are part of mourning and grief and its excruciatingly slow fade over time.

I do not seek to express the fixed psychology of a single closed subject. The subject of the artwork, is dispersed and multiple, not only because this artwork is not grounded in modernist thinking about a self and its individual knowledge of the world, but because it is grounded in multiple accounts of a place, multiple points of view in a large site full of its own multiples and narratives. I take responsibility for all the fictionalization and compression of the space into what I remember or want it to be, for all the relationships between what is actually in situ there and ignoring what is there that does not fit my narratives. There is no claim to authenticity, thus it's a fiction, but of a broad, inconsistent and elusive sort. Cinema does this and it is allowed such license as I take. I am taking apart a cinematic work to such an extent that there are pieces still functioning, rolling on loops through projectors, or flashing intermittently in a corner, but the dregs, the beginnings, the sketch-work is all blown out for any and all to see. It would be too theatrical to say it is a process of fiction and cinema revealed. There is no revelation, but rather what I hope to be an open work, a visit-able archive that repeats, that continues and that is potentially productive.

3.2 Duration captured at the level of statement

My attempts to draw measures of the affective relationship I have to the narrative fragments of the Isthmus and to the intrusive, persistent quality with which they intrude into my daily life was influenced by my receipt of an illustrated history of timelines *Cartographies of Time* (Rosenberg & Grafton, 2010). The book endeavours to show the range of ways human beings have faced the challenge of representing the events and durations of time in two-dimensional images and documentation. The book includes an abstract musical score by John Cage. It is one of many visual and abstract images that composers would create during the burgeoning of experimental 20th century music.

John Cage's score abstracts and represents visually, duration and the experience of it within one document - the affective intensities of sound waves over a fixed duration. His visual partition triggered my desire to measure affective responses, which I heretofore had only attempted to register through my performances before the camera. I wanted to envisage what my performance would be as a series of marks across a page, a document of affect but with the trappings of authority and measurement. I wanted to confuse the timelines rolling around scrolls, with the material scrolling of the film around the reels. Conflating them in my imaginary allowed them to take on interrelated, communicating qualities. The result is my measure-like, absurd charts and

drawings. These drawings are measures of the potent affect that the story fragments of the isthmus carry for me.

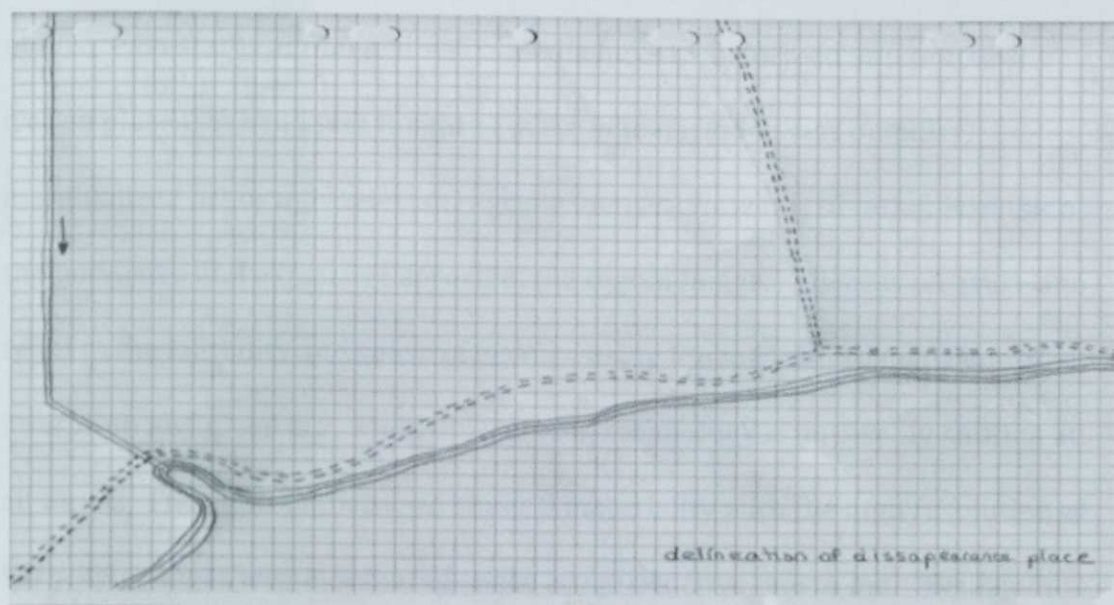


Figure 3.1 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Delineation of a Disappearance Place* (2010) graphite on paper, 22 x 28 cm

I do not distinguish between a chosen, held and controlled duration and a story fragment or element when there is the least figurative detail visible. I conflated or purposefully mix scrolls of drawings on paper, film or acetate rolled around film reels, durations of sound recordings, pulses and flashes of projected light and figures moving and reacting to their environment within the frame. I acknowledge that at some point the distinctions between all of these are useful to many purposes but not my own.

3.3 The status of the photochemical moving image

Over the time since I first learned to make films and videos, the outsider or mainstream status of film and video media have transformed and practically traded places. When I was taught to make cinema, video was outsider, marginalized art or ugly television-grade images. Now it is film that is outside the pervasive and expansive spread of the digital image. There is pleasure and relief in the fallibility and sense of leakage using the medium so many consider inferior in any given era, when the status of technology is un-fixedly shifting at all times. The contrast between super 8 materiality with the high resolution of HD video images within a shared space is a productive one to me. "Benjamin once suggested that the utopian possibilities of a medium make themselves most visible at the moments of its birth and death, and this suggestion has undergirded and framed much of the recent discussion of the obsolescence of photochemical media, and what Rosalind Krauss has called the *post-medium condition*". (Beckman & Ma, 2008, p.8) This text brought to mind the utopian possibilities of the medium of photochemical film and its death or obsolescence. I would suggest that anticipation and curiosity about this death and obsolescence in on the mind of most artists who work with film. Curiosity about the nature and limits of such a transformation in the status of this technology and the moment of its obsolescence, is what makes it so stimulating to work with. I am heavily influenced by structural and experimental film of the 60s and

70's, but my narrative cinema education was traditional, so that narrative films that influence me come from Lubitsch to Tarkovsky. Responding to the status of film as a medium has long been a compelling drive of non-commercial filmmakers of every sort. A significant part of experimental film's project in the 20th century was to distinguish itself from industrial modes of Hollywood cinema, as well as counter and critique its project. Not only did filmmakers work to reinforce film as an art in and of itself, but it occupied an uncertain and unfixed status on the outsides of contemporary art as well. In purist programs to show film to be an art in and of itself, experimental cinema insistently attempted to take attain a status on par with contemporary art, all the more so for its superior position far outside the influences of the contemporary art market. The changes wrought in the early 70s by the dematerialized artworks of conceptual art, the inter-disciplinarity of Fluxus and the experimentation with space of expanded cinema dispersed the project of film as an art in and of itself, into diffuse milieus where medium-specificity was not the only rigour to hold sway. The work of this period is part of the context of my choice to use small-gauge film in my practice this relatively recent history of film and at the same time the uncertainty I associate with film's obsolescence are both never far from my mind.



Figure 3.2 Jen Leigh Fisher, still from *My Dear One* (2011), DV video loop, 1:60.

Because my work arises from my experimentation with sensory relationships I develop with a place, the materiality of the film image is very often what I require for a work. I am attracted to the unreliable, slightly damaged 70's film cameras I use for their charming ease of use, even though they may tend to wear out and parts may cease to work at any moment on a shoot. A material intimacy is possible with a small 70's consumer film camera, whether a consumer camera designed for home use or a weathered news camera that operates with a crank, I feel an empathy and warmth for them that no digital equipment elicit. I feel even more empathy with the images they produce. When I say empathy, I am describing an attraction for the images, but also identification with them. They are sometimes jittery due to registration pins, they are sometimes a poor quality

transfer, they are sometimes a damaged film stock that I have mishandled and in which errors or discoloration has appeared. It is not a didactic response to the digital regime that is behind my attraction to film at this time, but more of a necessary relief valve that remains full of potential.

The status of video production for artists between the 70's and now has also dramatically transformed. What once was a technology deemed accessible both in cost and in relative technical ease, so that an artist could work autonomously with video with a few workshops and artist-run camera rental, has become a medium that takes up significant gallery space with increasingly inaccessible technical and monetary constraints. Everyone can use a cell phone camera but few people are prepared to deal with the vagaries of what seem like hundreds of HD codecs and the transcoding required for exhibition of their work professionally without assistance. The shift towards obsolescence of film has occurred over a period where the opposite trajectory has been covered by video. I am making work in this context.

3.4 Materiality and the troubling of opticality by the other senses

My process as I have previously described involves a performative exploration with a place. I then find a point of enquiry, or a set of questions that set up the curiosity that my shoot will try to satisfy. I am interested in the tactile eye, some confluence of my senses that can operate within my film. I am interested in complicating or bothering the precision of vision. My vision is unreliable, and so instead of despairing of it I have to test it and play with it. My vision is often poor and I will play with lenses free of the camera, positioning them in relation to my body and the subject of the image until I feel quite perverse in the effects. That is to say, I am seeking some strange characteristic in what is before me that I can work on. I play intuitively with the cameras and lenses and microphones until something appeals to my contrariness and curiosity at once. When I can feel I am getting somewhere surprising and somehow that goes against the grain of the fixity of how what I am filming or recording is conceived. This becomes the work. This going against the grain usually consists of my inclusion of my bodily senses in the process.



Figure 3.3 Jen Leigh Fisher, *My Dear One* (2011), DV video loop, 1:60.

When I am looking at the footage and listening to the recordings I am interested in the insides of the film and the insides of the material that is recorded. The insides of a film image are somehow imagined to be somewhere in the thickness of the emulsion. This is very thin. But figuratively, in my head, it is unlimited in its potential for surprise and sea-like transformations. The surface of the film image is a liquid sea to me. This is all very nice to say, but the consequences of this are that I am not terribly concerned with accuracy of exposure and focus and like it very much when certain things go wrong. These error-filled images, which are crawling with silver-halide particles, or pixels, or noise, or dirt and dust, they are the material claim I can make in my practice. They are a mark and shadow and stain I have made in the world.

3.5 The performative and perceptual duration.

The starting point of my practice is sensory-performative responses to a place. When I am in a place, a certain place that causes me to respond in a performative way, triggering analogous thinking, sensory intensity, perceptual tricks of the mind's eye, sensations that while intense, yield up notions that stir up and agitate my imaginary to such an extent that the place, this bodily and imaginary experience, then forms part of loops that will occupy my mind from that point onward. To describe it another way, the sensation of being in that place and the notions and references it unleashes, create an associated film loop that will repeat over and over again in my daily life, until it becomes a film or recording. Even then, it will often continue to repeat. Frequently recording the film or recording the sound of the duration will counter and quiet this loop that repeats in my consciousness.

The intensity and complexity of such experiences, I call an interval. There is a duration of this intensity, where multiple associations, analogies, perceptual transformations; for example my eye staring so long that I tear up in the wind and the focus changes, transforms in and out of focus, mimetic responses empathy responses to machine clattering – I set my teeth to clattering, I add my

breath to the timing of gusts of wind while filming, iconographic associations – horizon lines receding like those in 19th century landscape paintings, ruins of 20th century industrial buildings with purposeful ruin images drawn in the 18th century or Ader's Dutch path cut into the for leaning into and falling down.

From such sensory, mimetic and perceptual responses, my process passes to a series of analogous, discursive references and associations such as the fragments of stories that occur in this place. I begin to transform my sensory responses and associations into a turning, twisting, fictionalized forms, gestures and narrative impulses. This is not easy to describe because it is not a reasoned process but an intuitive and imaginative one. In my mind's eye what is before me as a film gets more complicated and I begin to create attitudes towards the place and my response that are akin to flashes of characters I could perform, or focal lengths and film stocks that could be chosen for the image before me. The flashes of characters come from what I sense in the place, the flashes of imagery of the duration before me come from the innumerable filmed moving images I have seen over a lifetime, and imagined and repeated in my head in turn. Sometimes this experience can occur and then pass away. But if there is a persistent, insistence about it, if I feel a mounting curiosity and need for it, I sense I will make a film. As it gets more and more clear what I want out of this image and scene, as it complexifies, attitudes toward it, questions to demand of

what is before me intensify and something like a fictionalizing occurs. Attitudes towards what I see, characterizations of the camera work and timing, often an idea of the sounds and their intensity looping rhythmically comes into my head as I stand there. It starts to form as a temporal interval in my head, and a curiosity for what might come about from such intervals is what propels the work to continue. At this point I do not know what I will make but I know I will find out.

My background as an artist is as a filmmaker, trained with 16 mm film, cutting at benches, rolling lengths of film stock and magnetic tape through machines. No video editing was available to us, or if it was it was a medium considered so lowly by our pros that we would never have dared use it for anything important. This is hard to imagine now. However, if you have a strip of film in your hands, and you pull it through a viewer, the speed of your body's movement controls the timing of the fragment. After you have pulled it through, and the succession of still photographs has passed in movement before your eyes, you must stop and roll it back to see it again. It was not possible to see a loop unless you printed a shot twice in a row, or constructed a loop for a projector. But this was not part of editing. Any repeat of a duration required its manual, linear rewind. And during that rewind you memorized what you had seen and tried to loop it that way in your head. What is required is that you hold

and retain this movement in your mind's eye. You memorize it in a way, and suspend your senses; you hold it in your head until you can see it pass before you through the viewer again. This is a rhythmic short term memorizing you must do if you are going to make any choice about the timing of the scene. Each shot becomes a duration in your head. These durations repeat in your imagination as you try to construct them one after another into a film. This memorized duration has a speed, a visual rhythm and a power to repeat compulsively in your head, long after you have left the editing bench. What was necessary then, is still part of my process now.

That moving image fragments (shots) are temporal durations that repeat is a given. That narrative fragments are temporal durations that repeat is a given. When I say such things in a visual arts studio I am at times looked at rather blankly. Fixed images all become temporal durations for me. Even a painting or photograph, if it draws me in, my mind will ascribe it a duration. It is like a guitar effect pedal pressed or an exhalation that extends for a limited number of beats. This is perhaps one of the most crucial parts of my process, and it influences how I experience place and see images. My background as an artist is as a filmmaker, my background as a filmmaker was as a musician and actor.

Organization of what is seen and heard into visual and aural rhythms to let it sink into my senses, to allow it to be memorized for re-experience afterwards, these are the first steps of my process. As I describe it I see that the memorization for re-experience is an intrinsic part of any cinematic image (moving image). It is an image with a temporality or rhythm within it, say wind moving the trees, and a temporality extrinsic to it, a length of its duration, and it has a third temporality that is virtual which is how often and with what rhythm is it reoccurs either in the mind or in a projection. Moreover, another temporality could be identified as that of the rhythm of the re-occurrence or repeat of a looped image projected and the re-occurrence in the minds eye that has retained it and plays it back in your head like a moving after-image, for I would suggest that this is what transpires when I watch any moving image.

The rhythms of the body (breath, eye movements, heart rate) complexify any rhythm we see, feel and hear before us in the gallery or cinema. I work with a *post-optical* understanding of our senses as a given in my practice. These ideas freed me up in my art practice so that it might restart six years ago. Christine Ross summarizes post-optical strategies as " those strategies, which partake of contemporary art's questioning of the paradigm of opticality (the Wölfflinian view of vision as whole and immediate, as a disembodied process that unifies

what is seen).”⁸ Ross goes on to identify two components of post-optical strategies in contemporary media art with which I can identify at work in my practice, which I often vaguely refer to as an instability and un-fixedness that I seek out when I am working that I casually take as givens: that time is not linear and the visual perception is unreliable. Ross describes “two aesthetic operations: a refutation or indifference to the passage of time and 2) a perceptual limitedness,... for it is through the phenomenon of perceptual limitedness that the spectator experiences the fallibility of her perception ...(in order to...) activate a temporal passage outside the parameters of progress teleology and linear succession.”⁹ Though I cannot claim that my work successfully fulfils these parameters, I can only state that it is part what I am looking for in my work.

⁸Ross, Christine. (2008). The Suspension of History in Contemporary Media Arts. *Intermédialités*, 11., 128.

⁹ Ibid., p. 128

CHAPTER 4

ISTHMUS AS AN EXHIBITION: MAKING ELSEWHERE HERE

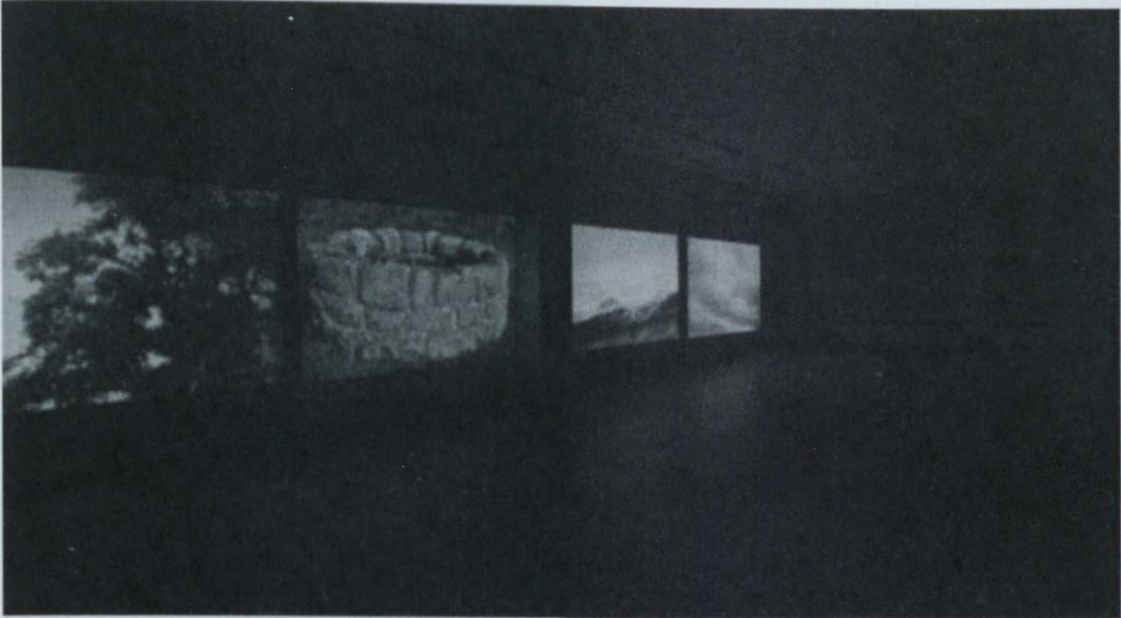


Figure 4.1 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loops, six channel audio, 5:00

1.1 Isthmus as an exhibition: making elsewhere here

The following chapter consists of notes written while working on the artworks that will appear in the final exhibition. These notes provide an overview of key paths my creative production has taken. This work arises from the process of the generative archive. Some works enter into it, such as super 8 films or photographs, my own and in the collections of others, that I collected and gathered together for the project. Some works emerge from this archive, as fictions created by working and re-working the narratives of the site. Each work is actively connected to it. They are connected together conceptually, metaphorically and materially.

The exhibition *Isthmus - Making Elsewhere Here* assembles multiple channel

video installation, four single-channel videos looping on wall-mounted screens and two consultation tables with pencil drawings. The exhibition took up two rooms of the Galerie B-312 in Montréal. *Isthmus* developed into an installation of a single four channel video work in the large room and four video loops on monitors and a number of drawn sketches on two consultation tables in the adjoining room of the B-312 gallery. My goal in creating this installative exhibition was to create a narrative that functioned by fragments and the creation of suggested associations between the images and narrative elements in the shared space.

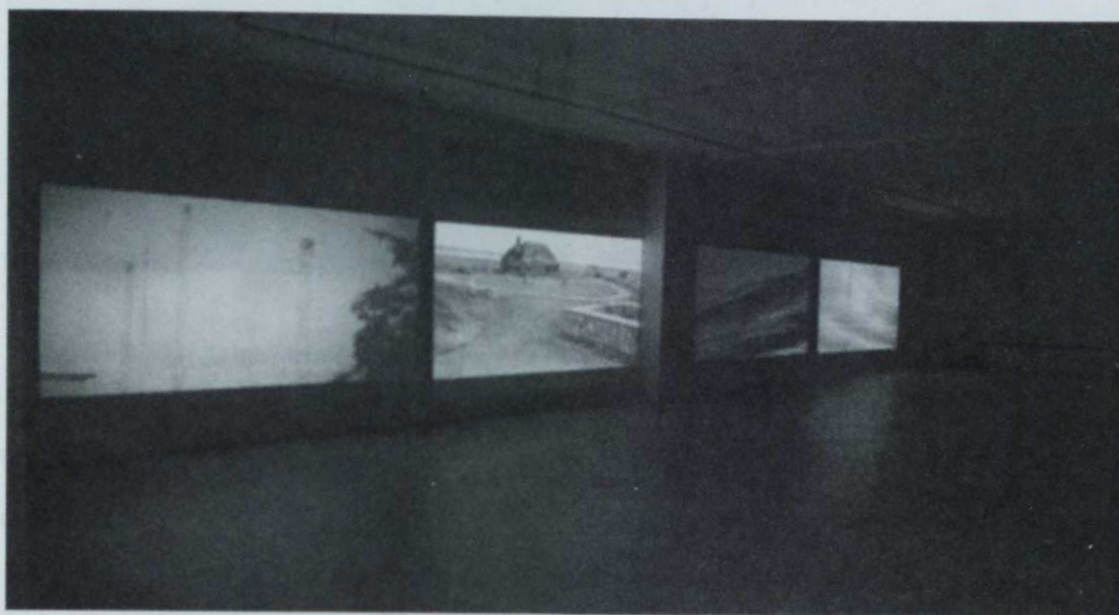


Figure 4.2 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loops, six channel audio, 5:00

Isthmus is a result of research preoccupied with the following: the fallibility of claims to place and identity, the instability of human systems imposed on nature, the cyclic nature of both moving images projection and the forces of nature, the passage of time and its representation in our built environment, its generation of

the experience of anachronism, the instability of history and claims to it, the conceptual staging of an idea, even when that idea contains subjectivity, contradiction and an imaginary that is absurd.

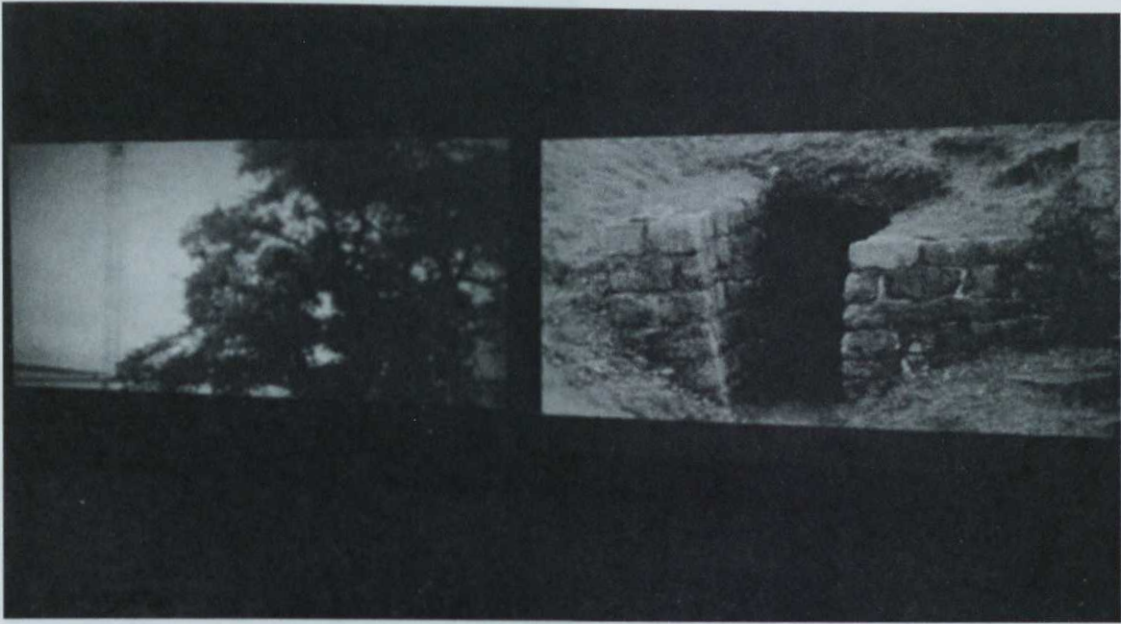


Figure 4.3 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loop, six channel audio, 5:00

Instead of directly telling a linear story, documenting a fact-based veracity or constructing a didactic montage, I sought to treat story fragments as though they were a system in and of themselves and as a result the analogue film images, video images and pencil-drawn measurements on paper all relate to this system I endeavour to invoke and suggest to the spectator.

I gathered and treated narrative family anecdotes as data in parallel with the other scientific tidal or technological (shortwave radio, 18th century fortifications, ecological risks to the Acadian dykes from seawater levels rising) data and documents I gathered during my creative process. I conceived of this exhibition as a response to working with these collected materials, which I

began to refer to as my generative archive. My generative archive developed into the amorphous mass of stories and measurements, scientific documents and films shot on the isthmus over the last few years as my preoccupation with the place grew.

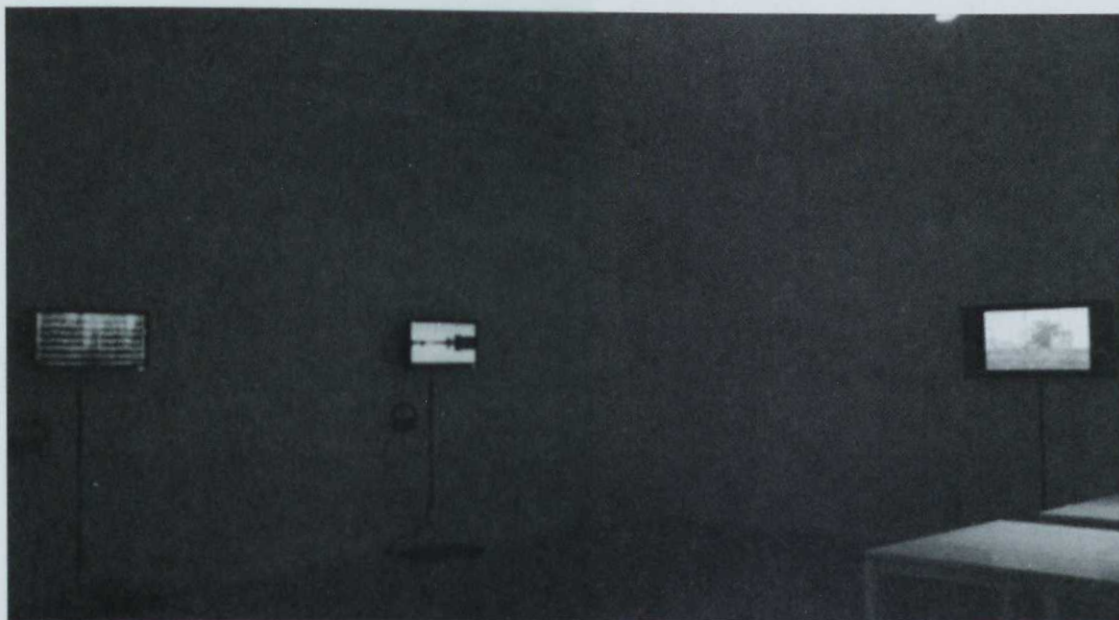


Figure 4.4 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Isthmus : Making Elsewhere Here* (2011), second room in exhibition: *Blackwreath* (2011), HD video loop, 2:40, *Special* (2011) HD Video loop, :55 and *Landscape Conceit* (2011) Super8 / DV, 4:30.

As the collection had begun as what I conceived of as a generative archive, I began to create fictions in response to it, little stories and measurements, one after another. A true story based on my family's past, or my own experience, was then fictionalized even further in response to the effects of the generative archive. This is the process that generated the story videos such as *Special* (2011) and *BlackWreath*(2011). It is also how drawings began to come into the project. I began to fictionalize the data of the place and began to *data-ize* the stories of the place. I began to treat an amorphous poetic condition such as feeling a sense of being elsewhere, not fully grounded in the here and now, but preoccupied with another place and the narrative events which occurred there:

an *elsewhereness* that is indeed a requirement for the experience of narrative at all. I began to try to measure this sensation and mark points on a graph that might chart it. In this way I sought to increasingly conflate what is story and what is fact, to give them reciprocal relations in my work, an equivalency with which they are otherwise not considered.

The installative exhibition developed from a set of questions, but explores the notion of belonging to a place through the belonging that narrative can create. In my project I tell and retell and respond to family and official history narratives about this specific place on the coast of the Bay of Fundy.



Figure 4.5 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loops, six channel audio, 5:00

The archive connotes a documentary or document-like status to its elements. This is true in some cases, such as ecological reports and archival photographs found in institutional and radio station archives. But as true and accurate as one

element may be, another is entirely fictional and as in the case of *Black Wreath* and *Special*, makes no claim to any aspect of veracity or direct relationship to the real. Side by side, official archive documents and images are paired and in close relationship with my erroneous, fictive, emotive and inaccurate drawings, measures and claims. I did this out of great curiosity about the effect of one on the other. I wondered whether scientific studies in such close proximity render my fictions more plausible and whether the strange sounding magical thinking my videos, or inaccurate graphs undermine the credibility of official and scientific documents. I found that the scientific and historic documents gave my inventions credibility in a very easy method. I was pleased with this effect. It seemed another way I was able to undermine and play with the official status of historical records of the place. It felt like another way to claim it as mine. Instead of representing this place or these histories (official or familial) with the artifice of veracity, in the interest of storing up a questioning of identity and place, of authenticity of belonging or the poetic truth of an artist evoking one place inside an exhibition space, I asked the question, what would result if I considered the notion of belonging to a place as a system in and of itself, as fallible as the many others there.

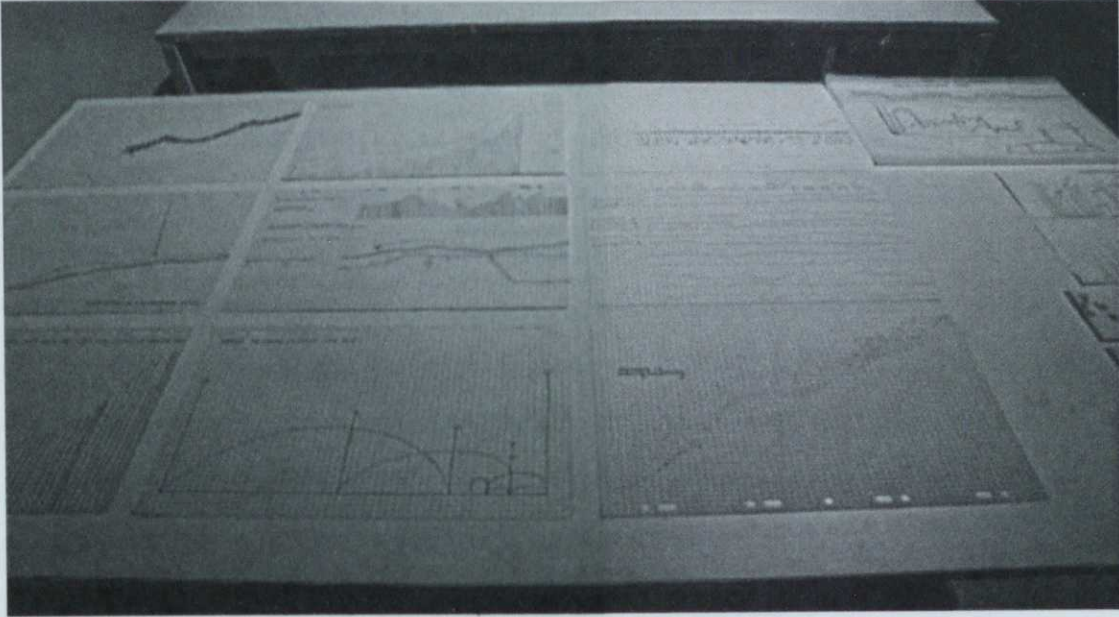


Figure 4.6 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Generative Archive Consultation Table One and Two* (2011)

The exhibition is not taking a didactic position against the master narratives, or modernist discourses of progress inherently present in the human interventions on the Isthmus. My family's experiences of the place are dwarfed by the grand historical narratives that have been inscribed there. The Isthmus, or land bridge, is known by locals as the site where the early Acadian village Beaubassin was established. However, it is also a place where both the French and English constructed fortifications, conducted battle and from whence the Acadian village was burned out and its inhabitants notoriously deported. My family's early 20th century occupation in a small house on the French fortifications and the drowning at sea of my great grandfather is a forgettable and irrelevant fragment of the past that only concerns a handful of my family members. Yet I am compelled to enlarge, rework and revisit his disappearance again and again in this project. I am compelled to retell and reanimate this drowning disappearance of the father of the family in the Bay of Fundy and their

subsequent penury and disintegration. I use this disappearance to work over the disappearance of my own father, to invoke other disappearances from artworks to whom my work has associations and inspirations, namely Tacita Dean's works that deal with the disappearance at sea of Donald Crowhurst, and much more indirectly, the disappearance and connection with Bas Jan Ader that was established narratively, in accounts of his disappearance and his possession of Crowhurst's shipboard journals. Instead of confusion of fact and fiction I am conflating it expressly on purpose, because this is the way that most closely resembles how I experience the world. I do not believe in the regime of fiction as self-expression of a personal truth, nor do I believe in history as linear progression of causal events, categorizable into discrete and fixed categories of official and non-official, relevant and irrelevant. I sought to undermine the usual dichotomy that sets a master narrative of concern to all, against minor facts from the past that are messy and concern very few.

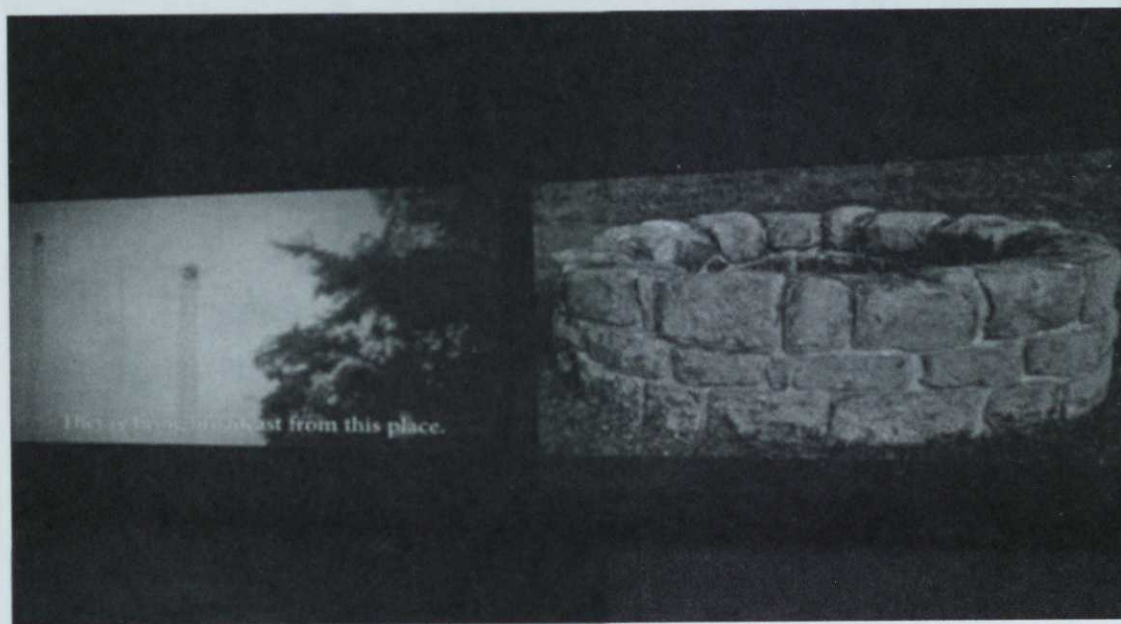


Figure 4.7 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loops, six channel audio, 5:00

4.1 Re-making the site into a narrative space

I began with filming interviews and finding scientific studies. I shot on the site and then began drawing as a way to work with this experience of *elsewhereness*. To be present here but actually your head is somewhere else. I am often here in my head. So what you have presented is a version of this place that is filtered, and even fictionalized through me. It makes no attempt to present fact or veracity. This is largely the purpose of *Isthmus 4 Channel*, (2011), a four channel HD video loop. It is an invocation of what my thinking the place is like. It is my remapping or my codec even, when I am joining together spaces that are not quite what I make them appear to be.

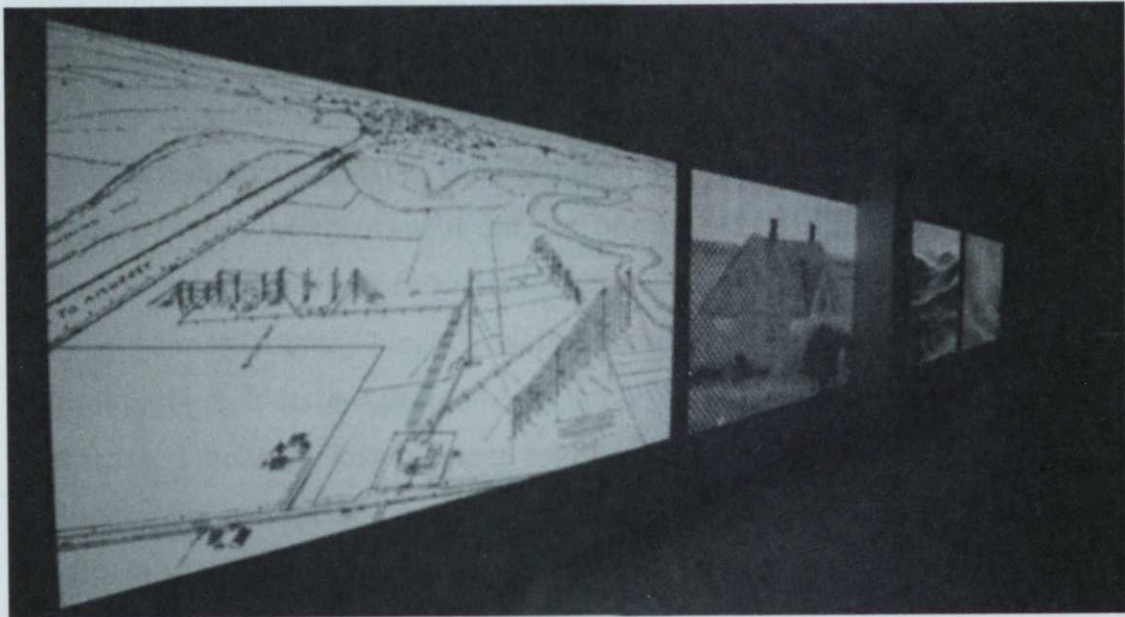


Figure 4.8 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loop, six channel audio, 5:00.

I am remaking the space in the gallery in a way that has little to do with the configuration of the place. It is a mental place that is grounded in a real land,

water, and history. The forces or phenomenon of the place are my base working materials. This work compresses space and time. I remake the current space into one that conforms to my imaginary's version of it. I present what ruins or remains of this place are still extant on the site as a place of old human habitation, without specific identification of place or its use. HD video looped in synchronous multi-channel projection compressed the time and space into a version of the Isthmus as I see it, that could never be filmable as one continuous space. One is confronted by perceptual limitations in the unreliability of visual perception to draw together the desired parts of the landscape; the narrative markers of place, the most haunted landscapes that suggestively lead ones mind to consider what is not there, what was there before - all of this is only possible with a lateral, successive montage. It is an extended duration of the landscape as I have remade it, to serve my purposes. It was the way for me to make many *elsewheres* at once in one temporal location. The waves are only hammering at the coastline in my imaginary. The rhythm of the flagpole, recorded from inside the object, rings out only over the old fort, but the old fort evokes human habitation that has been there a very long time. I transform the fragments of stone into a marker of my family's habitation there, many ordinary human's habitation there, footsteps permanently cut into a hillside, a stone well, burnt sand stone. I make the fort over into a marker of the demolished domestic habitation that was there. I evoke no battle, nor contestation, save against the elements and above all the sea.

4.2 Waves as Natural and Electronic Phenomena in the Exhibition

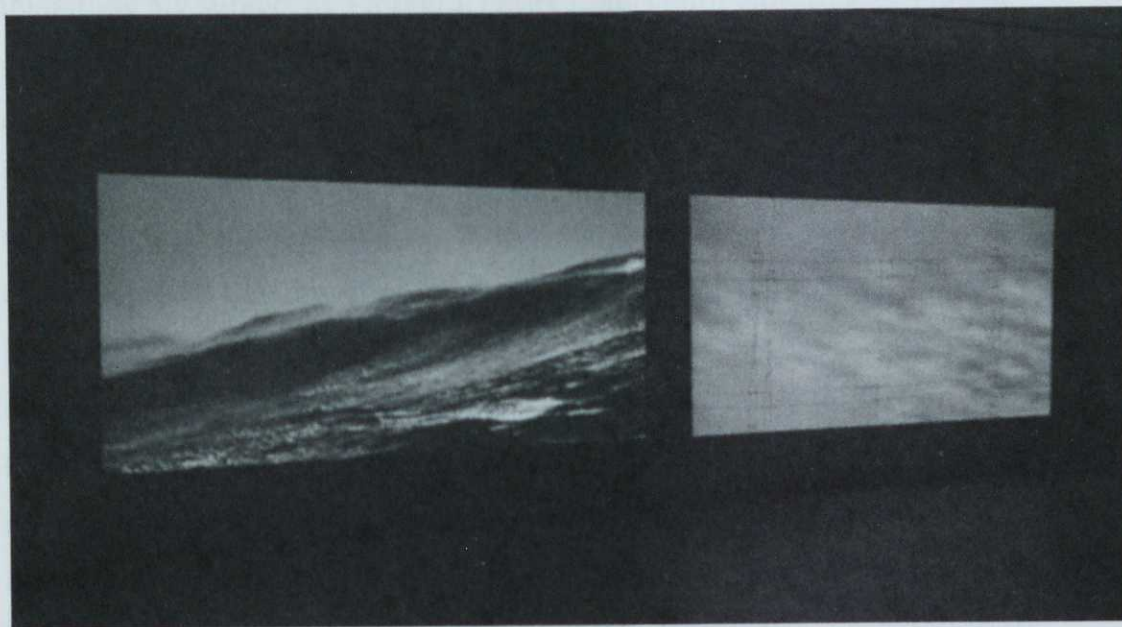


Figure 4.9 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *Isthmus 4 Channel* (2011), four channel HD video loop, six channel audio, 5:00

The wave is a significant part of my installation. It is literally present as a surging, rolling sea-wave but also present in the measurement and representation of my voice, repeating stories that transpired on the Isthmus and inscribing my voice, a direct bodily presence, into the narrative site of the installation. Figuratively it extends itself continually through the project, from the point of departure, that the bay has a form and a tide height that gives it a wave resonance potential, this theoretical possibility charges through my research, like an imperceptible rhythm, because of what wave resonance can signify: the resonant wave frequency at which things fall apart. This is not only a kind of theoretical and imaginary oblivion that awareness of such wave activity can invoke, but it stands in for a group of things that are potent to me in this place; drowning, oblivion, the imperceptible, the persistent absence of what has is disappearing - the romantic fantasy of collapse and oblivion. This creates the

sincere impression that I am at my most effective as an artist, when I am imagining my subject as a integral entity that is both vibrating and full of potential to collapse itself before my eyes, or at the very least before my mind's eye. This place collapsing into the sea is nothing I would ever wish for. But I feel far closer to being able to imagine it in very many places across the Isthmus. The destruction all at once can occur in the imaginary, where one is able to compress time, compress the impact of collapse towards its final outcome. In my studio I have a postcard with the Sol Lewitt quote illogical statements create new experiences and a note about finding the instability in my subjects, their point of instability, their imperceptible potential to disintegrate, to leak, to fail. This is not romantic but instead part of my desire to know and perceive with my artwork, in ways that are not immediately apparent, nor give the conventional or status quo version of what a thing is. For me this is the only motivating interest in making work, not my persona self-expression, but the resetting before my perceptual capacity, an effort to see and perceive in a way that is freed up and full of uncertainty. The waves come from the dreaming about the potential for wave resonance crossed with thinking about the disappearance by drowning in my family stories and in the art historical references I worked with throughout my research. These waves are related to the song I sing where I say I will search for my father in this place. The waves also carry a lot of romantic allusions to be overcome, to have sensory extremes of nature.

The waves of sound that represent my repeating stories, the waves of sound creating a topography of the Isthmus, one measurement standing in for another, the waves of electrical vibration present in the materials recorded by contact microphones, pulsate throughout the installation. They are constitutive but because they hold such a connotative charge for me, they are also destabilizing. There is nothing reassuring about irregular wavelength and a consciousness of

their irregularity and dysynchronous rhythm. But this is what an installation should do in my work.

4.3 Measure-making and indexical print materiality

In seeking ways to work with both sound and the narrative fragments that my family repeat about the Isthmus, I found spectrograms and spectrogram software as a method to render my voice performing narrative fragments as a visual imprint. I chose to work with monochromatic versions of these measures and to manipulate them to create density and an almost landscape-like rendering of a story fragment. This allowed me to perform the narrative fragments without telling the stories explicitly. I wanted to make a work using the narrative fragments as a base material but that would create something separated and freed of the over-determined drama of story-telling itself. After all, this research is about the limits to which one can represent imperceptible things like my relationship to this place and its stories. I want to work with emotional or narrative fragments and transform them into something else; a print. An imprint is not only complicated by its depth, but by its impermanence.

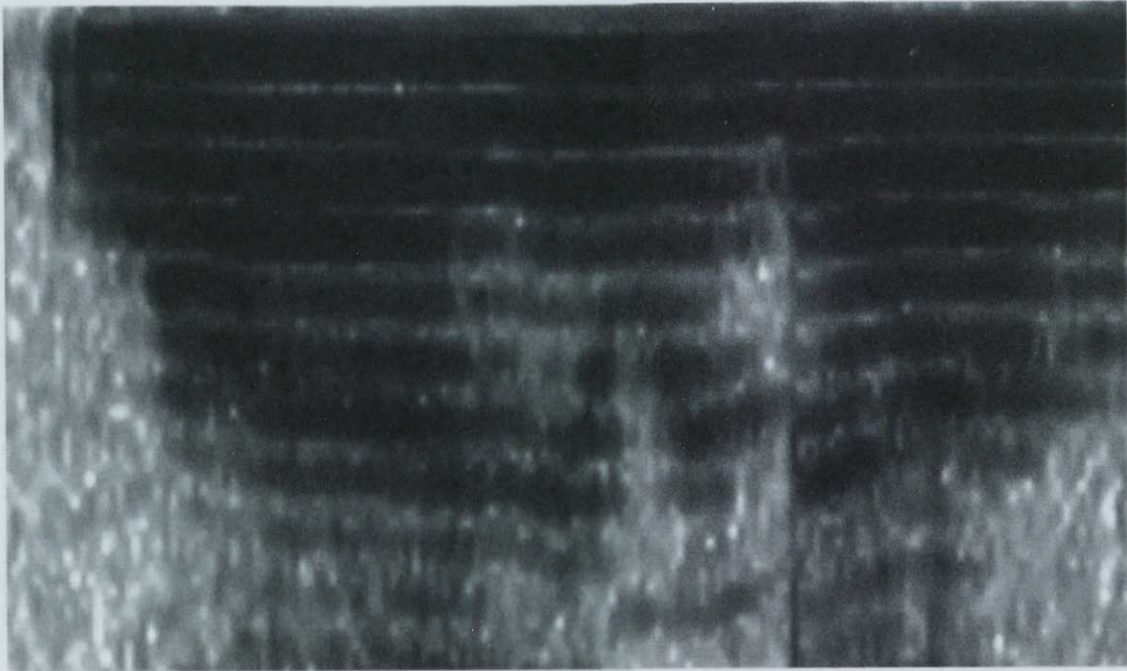


Figure 4.10 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *Black Wreath* (2011), HD video loop made with spectrograms of singing voice, 2:40

I am reducing emotional content of the stories to what are to me images that act as ciphers for photographic prints; they contain for me the indexicality of the photochemical print and the body. I am working with stories rendered prints with my voice. This transformation of the family narratives through my body to something flickering, print-like and of a sound-loop duration is the most personally satisfying piece my research has produced. It seeks to render these stories mute. They pass through my body and become an abstract image, claimable and knowable in their mysteriousness only to me.

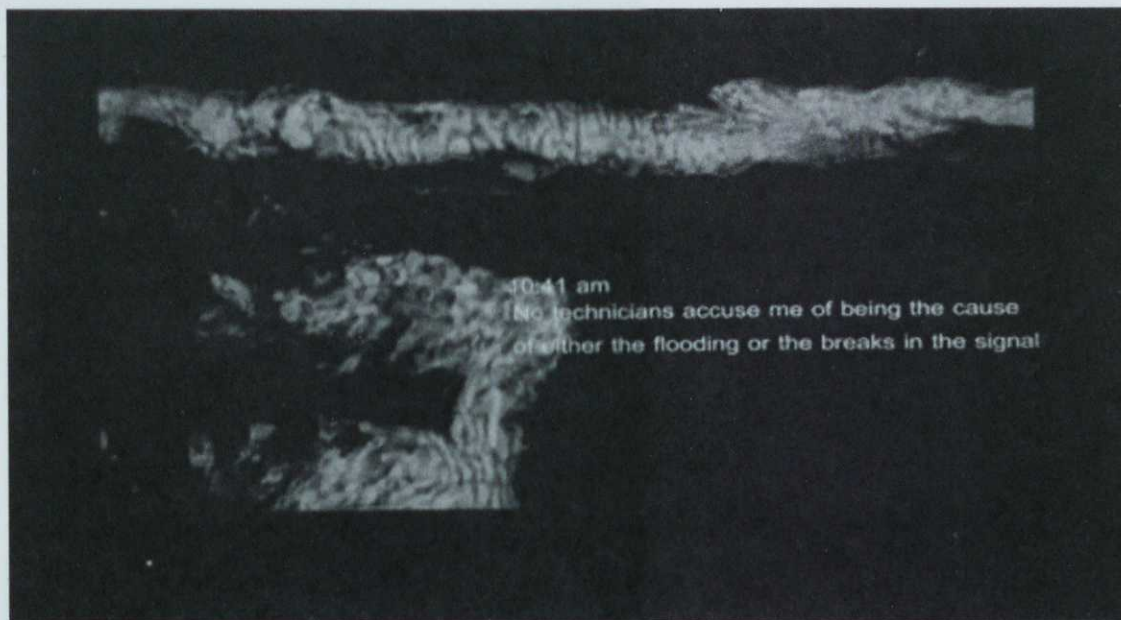


Figure 4.11 Jen Leigh Fisher, detail, *System Docudrama* (2011), HD video loop, :45

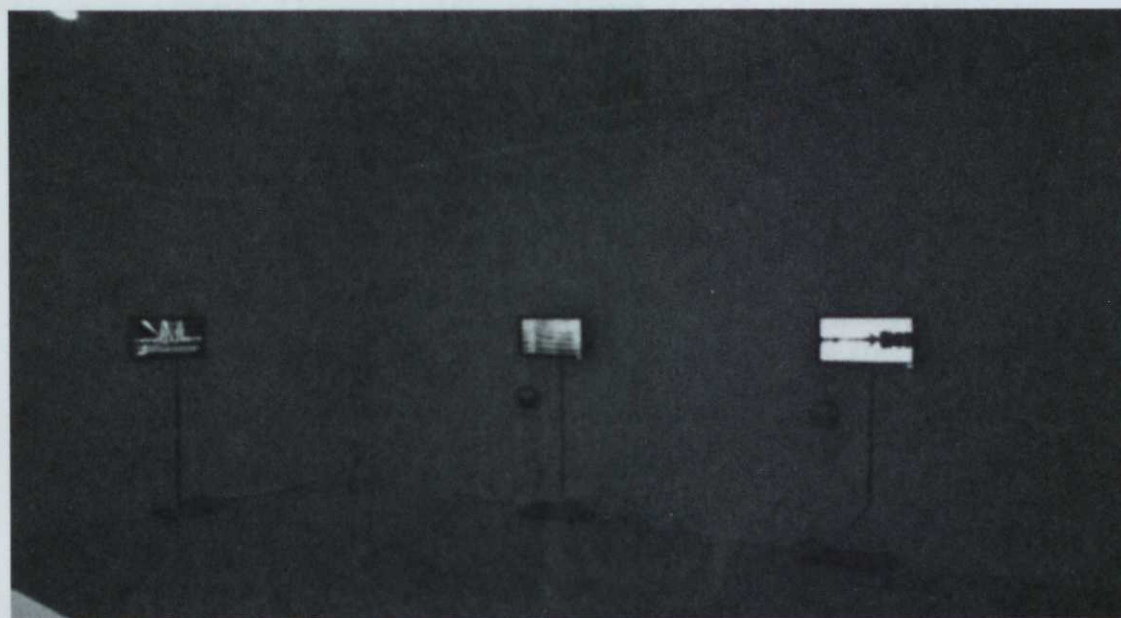


Figure 4.12 Jen Leigh Fisher, *Isthmus Installation View: System Docudrama* (2011), HD video loop :45, *Blackwreath* (2011), HD Video, 2:40, *Special* (2011), HD video loop, :55

4.4 Generative Archive Drawings and Timelines

During my research I made many drawings, they became a way to convey the intensity of my relationship to this place. They arrived out of my need for a way to express how intrusive thoughts of the Isthmus were before and during my filming. Attempting to consider the nature of the duration, either in a closed loop of projected images, or in the open loop of persistent narratives that repeat over and over again, I saw a score by John Cage and began making what was for me a sort of score. Visual scores have been drawn/written by composers of contemporary music throughout the 20th century. They are frequently very beautiful, and the temporal relationship between visual cues and marks, the way musicians can communicate about both intensity and duration with mark making on paper, and successfully plan and improvise from such images is fascinating to me. I began to make small scores, or chart-like measures to convey aspects of the Isthmus I felt were otherwise inexpressible and imperceptible. They evolved into what I consider to be measures of the unmeasurable and imperceptible. They are measurements of the effect of the repeated stories of the Isthmus on me, put to paper, awkwardly, compulsively and absurdly. I made drawings while I edited video and then made films based on my scoring or charting a film made of spectrograms. The spectrograms follow on my efforts to create ways for my voice to enter into my work. The analogue chemical print and its indexical vitality are a constant source of pleasure and strangeness for me in my process. The spectrograms, as a visual measure of my voice as well as images that contain a print-like ghostly materiality, connect and embody both elements. Graphs become narrative. Drawings narrate a specific absurdity in my relationship to the archive and to the narrative of the site. They are fledgling and inaccuracy filled attempts to express what is incommunicable.

Conclusion

This project marks the beginning of a transition in my practice towards installation. This step complicates my already paradoxical relationship to physical space. The stories generate films, which generate drawings, which generate films. The project has uncovered many new paths of discovery for me, not only technically but also in my first works with spectrograms, collage on film and chart drawing. What I eventually named the generative archive in my work has become a fruitful conceptual envelope for heterogeneous activities that can evolve concurrently within my practice. Working with the spectator's experience of these visual rhythms in a space is something I intend to continue to develop in my practice. The significance of this work in my practice is above all, the dispersion of my work across the space of the gallery. The concentration has shifted from the conception of finite, closed and independent works to the relationships between the elements of the installation. I will continue to experiment with representations of the passage of time and the sensory experience of technological intervention in the landscape.

It is possible that my entire installation in my final exhibition becomes a fixed duration, which I add to the generative archive. Temporally, I am creating continuity; a material and a metaphorical extension of two durational intervals. The short durations of my family's existence there extend like a vector back into the past and the durational interval of our disappearance from there, which has begun and extends out like a vector into the anterior future, to the exhibition's installation temporality and beyond it into the future. In this text I have tried to outline the significant ideas and influences on the methods and questions that drive my research. I believe that my attempt to contextualize my work in relation to anterior and potentially contradictory strategies in the history of art

can be related to a term recently developed to describe an aspect of certain contemporary art practices *meta-modernism*, based on the Platonic principle of *metaxis*, referencing an un-resolvable oscillation between two poles in time¹⁰. This has filled me with enthusiasm that my project and practice is not backwards looking or stuck in a historicizable point of time but can include a fruitful dialogue between multiple theoretical projects and points in time. The process of my art practice consists of multiple steps between initial approaches to a subject and place and the final projected image. Throughout this process my questions lead to contradictory attitudes in my work and an accumulation of affect that results in fiction, opacity and a strangeness that I recognize as my work. My project *Isthmus* is a continuity of something complex that I have known in my relationship to nature and artifice, as well as the inevitable disappearance and mortality of not just my family, but my own.

¹⁰ Vermeulen, Timotheus & Van den Akker, Robin. Notes on Metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2., 2.

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