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## The Way We Get By: Aesthetic Engagement with Place

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A “place ethic” demands a respect for a place that is rooted more deeply than an aesthetic version of “the tourist gaze” provided by imported artists whose real concern lies elsewhere.  
- Lucy Lippard

The intersection of aesthetics and ethics has had a long history in philosophy. Kant wrote *The Critique of Judgment* as a means to use aesthetic judgment to reflect how an ethical judgment could be both universal and particular; the result of a pure judgment of taste, stated Kant, “must involve a claim to validity for all men” (Kant, 1952, p. 51). However, despite this rich history, in the context of contemporary environmentalism, there is still much ambiguity in the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in actual practical modes of existence. Within such uncertainty, the central question of this essay is posed: Can an aesthetic experience inform, elucidate, or support any type of ethical understanding through interaction with place? Throughout this discussion, an ethic will be sought after that is located on both individual or personal, as well as one of immediate experience, in which each human being is encouraged to develop an awareness and respect for the place of their experience. The argument will be made that an aesthetic engagement with place is particularly well suited for deriving such an ethos.

One of the advantages of an aesthetic engagement with place is the capacity to create a relationship that has personal meaning, draws the individual in and engages. In this sense, the experience of a place-based work of art opens up possibilities for recreating the place *anew* – it enables the viewer to engage, interact, and understand with the place in a new way. This potential for a different type of experience of place through an aesthetic engagement can be very powerful. Drawing from the gender analysis of Judith Butler, the power of this potential can be demonstrated in its ability to “break through the surface of the body [or in this case, place] to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed upon that [place]” (Butler, 2006, p. 178). In a similar fashion to Butler’s description, an aesthetic engagement with place can provoke one to question the regulative discourses and established hierarchies that permeate an existing landscape. In turn, this questioning can be the source of discovery and awakening to new meanings within the landscape – even new ethical valuations.

Even with the potential to radically transform how a place is perceived and understood, aesthetic engagement should not be overestimated. It would be too hubristic to claim that the artist simply grants agency to the viewer agency through the experience of engagement. Just as it would also be erroneous to claim that the artist merely provides a new identity for the landscape – adding yet another epistemological layer onto the existing aggregate of identity. The type of engagement with place that does occur however, (through what Miwon Kwon refers to as “unsiting”) can be understood as providing the viewer with an alternative perspective, one that carries an accompanying awareness and respect (Kwon, 2004, p. 138). Aesthetic engagement does not entail an eradication of the existing identity of a place. Rather, it leads to the production of new meanings and values as a result of the imbrication between viewer, artwork and place. This essay attempts to examine how certain artistic practices bring the viewer into connection with an environment that facilitates a newfound respect and awareness – the derivation of an ethos.

### Engagement

Much of the ability to transform a place through an aesthetic engagement comes from getting the viewer to experience the place in an unorthodox manner, and to ask questions about the different experience. In this sense, aesthetic engagement can be considered as a form of questioning and analysis. The word “engagement” itself is significant because the etymology of the word “engagement” stems from the French word “engager,” meaning to pledge, commit, involve, encourage, hire or enlist. All of these verbs can easily be attributed to inquiry and I argue that to question something is to also become involved or engaged with that which is being questioned. Doesn’t questioning imply a certain *commitment* to that being questioned? Inquiry can also suggest a responsibility in the attempt to comprehend, even when intelligibility may fall short. The experience of a place itself can also be viewed as requiring a search, a beckoning of inquiry. When presented with images of a landscape, we instinctively scan its variations, methodically turning over every stone in search of irregularities, variances and information. As the curator Urs Stahel claims: “a landscape image – water, air, horizon – as a point of access demands searching, investigating, [and] contemplative views” (Stahel, 2003, p. 82). This is not to suggest that an engagement with place produces an ethics defined by care, love, and admiration, but it does imply that an indelible awareness is developed.

### Place

The term “place” is also utilized with a particular purpose in this discussion of aesthetic engagement because it can incorporate both indoor and outdoor spaces as well as the human and non-human. Although I heavily lean on the descriptor “place,” the term is meant to include a multiplicity of scapes. As understood in this context, places are never static. A place is an amorphous *bio-socio-historical zone of active exchange* between constituting forces. The geographer Tim Cresswell describes this active exchange as a “multi-faceted... coming together of the physical world... the processes of meaning production and the practices of power that mark relations” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 122). This type of constitution for place alludes to an unfinalized in-betweenness or liminality, in that there is a continuous oscillating exchange between the polyvalent constituting forces. Geographer Nicholas Entrikin calls this liminal quality “narrative,” because it links material phenomena with social practices and collective identities (Friedland, 1992, p. 14-15). This thinking also echoes Arjun Appadurai’s notion of multiple “scapes” within any given place and how places have a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 178). By thinking of a place as an active zone, we are able to understand how it can remain open to new modes of engagement, aesthetic or otherwise.

An aesthetic engagement with place focuses on the personal means of how the individual synthesizes and balances the intentions of the artist directing us into the landscape and the cultural impositions with the immanent experience of physical topography. An analysis of certain artistic projects, such as those of Janet Cardiff and Paul Rooney, reveal that an aesthetic engagement with the landscape often asks us to experience place from an out of the ordinary and personalized frame of reference. Both of these artists work will be examined in greater detail towards the end of this discussion. However, it is crucial to note that in the alternative experience of place in Cardiff and Rooney’s artwork, the potential is opened up for the viewer to derive an ethico-aesthetic relationship with place that resists absolute relativism while also

engendering a personalized ethic – one that is not weighed down by obligatory duty or adherence to categorical imperatives. An aesthetic engagement with place asks the viewer to consider “the contingency of one’s own ecological desires” and valuations within his or her new perception of place (Morton, 2009, p. 160).

### **Singular and Collective**

In order to illustrate how an ethical relation to place derived through aesthetic engagement can be personal, but also refute egocentrism or moral universalism, I propose an adaptation of Hannah Arendt’s (2005) discourse on ethics. A key aspect in Arendt’s ethics is the dissolution of universal morality. Instead, she turns inward to the particular thinking individual as a place where moral decisions are made. The basis of her discourse is derived from a reading of the Socratic dialogues. In many ways, Arendt’s reading of the dialogues can be considered a re-reading, one that is directed at the core of Socratic philosophy, leaving aside the intermediary rhetoric of his student, Plato. In the context of her own meditations on collective responsibility, Arendt focuses on Socrates’ concept of the inner dialogue, or what he himself calls *dianoesthai* (a reflection on the nature of something), in which thinking occurs through conversation between self and I (being-one). This dialogue, claims Arendt, eventually generates decisions and moral judgments.

As a proponent of solitude, in which the purity of the inner dialogue is realized, Arendt (2005) vis-à-vis Socrates requires isolation for thought to properly occur. This necessary Socratic estrangement, however, is given a clever hermeneutic twist when Arendt ponders that “the Socratic ‘being-one’ is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only just for others but for myself,” and she continues, “in the latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness” (Arendt, 2005, p. 184-185). What Arendt points toward with this statement, and what is most poignant for this discussion is that the individual is never entirely removed from the collective in moral judgments.

I argue that an equivalent melding of the individual and community often operates in an aesthetic engagement with place. This critical connection disavows a pejorative “unsiting” of place in which a self-serving ethic is developed. Instead, through aesthetic engagement, the viewer experiences a greater awareness of the intertextual dialogue and active exchanges within place. Therefore, *it is the nature of the aesthetic engagement with landscape that determines its limitations or liberations*. If there is a failure to recognize the multiplicity of scapes interwoven into a place, the engagement may be focused on the desires of the singular ego, producing a place ethic centered on the self. It is through aesthetic engagement that this narcissism can be countered by revealing the multiplicity of voices and their interconnectedness in the landscape.

### **Invented Fictions**

An engagement with place that is grounded in an aesthetic experience is better suited to engender an irruption to the normalized understanding of a place, is due in part to its ability to freely weave together material encounters with invented fictions and cultural inscriptions. The concept of an “invented fiction” comes to us from Jacques Rancière and his explication of our current epoch as an aesthetic regime. While sounding like a tautology, Rancière conceives of “invented fictions” as the ability to “investigate something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have disappeared, to find witnesses and make them speak of the materiality of the event

without cancelling its enigma” (Rancière, 2007, p. 129). “According to the logic specific to the aesthetic regime,” says Rancière, “[it] abolishes the boundary between the connection of fictional facts and that of real events” (Rancière, 2007, p. 130). In the form of invented fictions, aesthetic representations dissolve the privilege of fact over fiction. There are no specific forms that obligatorily correspond to a particular subject; there is an “absence of a stable relationship between exhibition and signification” (Rancière, 2007, p. 137). So, what is the importance of these invented fictions in an aesthetic engagement with the landscape? They are significant because as Tim Morton claims, they can break “open a dimension inaccessible to other experience[s], a dimension in which human beings, nature and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle” (Morton, 2009, p. 25). Through invented fictions, there is potential for a radical rupture in the edified regulating discourses and discursive practices existing within place – each of which is critical in determining the value of a place.

Some of the projects created by artists Janet Cardiff and Paul Rooney provide the potential for the viewer to engage place in a manner that “mesmerizes the imagination and engenders private myths” (Lingus, 2000, p. 153). In her audio walk entitled *Münster Walk* from 1997 [Fig. 1], Cardiff led the viewer/listener on a guided audio tour through the streets of



Figure 1. Janet Cardiff, *Münster Walk*, 1997, Audio walk with mixed media props (Cardiff, J. & Miller, G. B. 1997)

Münster, Germany. Not only did the audio track provide instructions for following a specific path, but it also gave the listener brief snippets of a mysterious narrative, “told in unsequential segments that never congeal into a complete account” (Williams, 1998, p. 63). This strategic withholding of information by Cardiff allowed the viewer to engender his or her own private myths with the landscape. The suggestive and alluring character of the invented fictions combined with the material phenomena of the value created an unconventional experience – prompting the viewer to fill in the blanks and co-author an experience of the place that has

engaged them. This type of experience provided a new relationship with place, creating an indelible mark on the viewer.

### Walks

Many of Cardiff's walking pieces aim to utilize invented fictions to develop an aesthetic engagement with place for the viewer. A press release for Cardiff's 2004 audio walk through the pathways of Central Park in New York City entitled *Her Long Black Hair* [Fig. 2], describes how the work succeeds at "interweaving stream-of-consciousness observations with fact and fiction" (Public Art Fund Press Release, 2004). Through the immediate sensations of bodily



Figure 2. Janet Cardiff, *Her Long Black Hair*, 2004, Audio Walk with photographs (Cardiff, J. & Miller, G. B. 2004)

movement, the materiality of a landscape, and the invented fictions communicated to the viewer through the recorded audio track, Cardiff creates a unique engagement. As the writer Paige McGinley (2006) asserts, these "non-linear soundscapes" evoke "questions regarding the relationship between landscape, sound, and narrative" (p. 54). When the viewer is prompted to ask questions, an engagement is induced that encourages a sense of respect and awareness. It is the particulars of the engagement and the trace that it leaves with the viewer that sustains this kinship and recognition. Feeling puzzled by Cardiff's narrative is important because it encourages the viewer to ask questions and become engaged – we don't typically ask questions about things that we are not concerned with. Ulrike Groos, the Assistant Curator for Skulptur Projekte in Münster in 1997 had been a long time resident of Münster when he experienced Cardiff's *Münster Walk*. He recalls the residuals of the engagement in these terms: "Even today, whenever I am in Münster, moments from Münster Walk – whispered comments, the sound of church bells or horses' hooves – continue to come to mind... [or] I am simply reminded of it by the noises of the city" (Groos, para.3, 1997). The lingering memories of the aesthetic

engagement instill a sense of connection with the place, creating unretractable marks on the consciousness of the viewer.

### Let Me Take You There

Paul Rooney's artwork entitled *Let Me Take You There: A Guide for a Field in Calderdale* is another project that offers the viewer an opportunity to engage with place. The narrated audio portion of the artwork begins by giving the viewer directions and instructions about how to prepare for, and find a specific location in a field outside of Calderdale, Yorkshire in England. The narrative then shifts into an anecdotal mode relaying bits of fact and fiction about the landscape, linking disparate entities such as a British documentary film, a Ted Hughes poem, and the English rock band Joy Division. What the narrative slowly reveals as the viewer stares upon the scene (either in person or on the video screen in the gallery) [Fig. 3] is that the seemingly bleak and banal bank of trees and frosted earth in the English countryside, is actually a landscape through which a multitude of lives and events have been woven together.

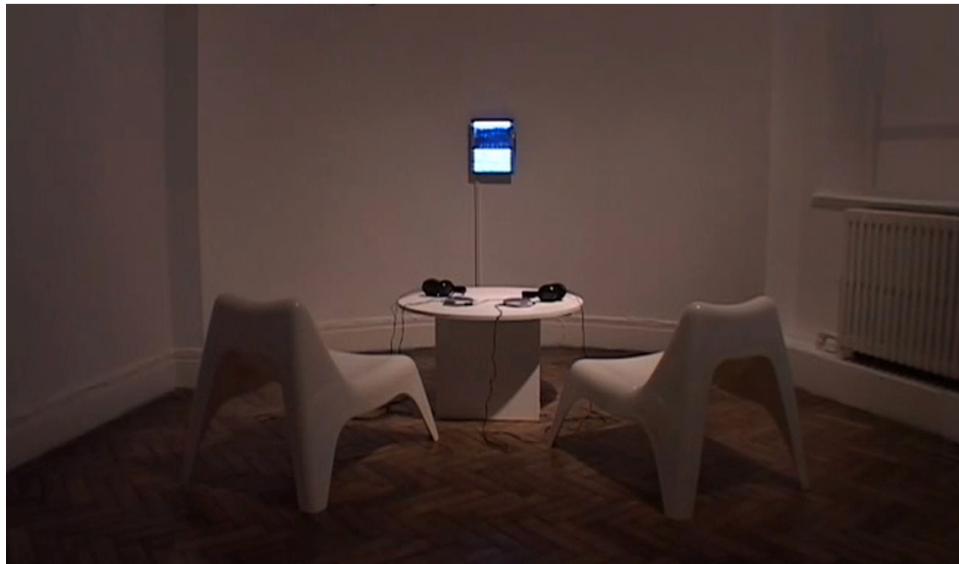


Figure 3. Paul Rooney, Gallery installation of *Let Me Take You There*, 2003 (Paul Rooney, Personal Communication, November 25, 2014)

As the narrative meanders between stories of different characters and situations, it attempts to instill a sense of place that geographer Doreen Massey refers to as “extroverted” (Doherty, 2009, p. 167). This sense of place “includes a consciousness of... links with the wider world” (Doherty, 2009, p. 167). This type of engagement with the landscape urges the viewer to understand place as an *bio-socio-historical zone of active exchange* – to perhaps even add a personalized thread into the weave of encounters collected within the place. In the encounter created by Rooney's narrative, the landscape is cast as location for exchanges and relations, drawing the viewer in as a participant in those exchanges. As viewers, when we become participants and personally engaged with what we are encountering, we often begin a sort of extended relationship through that encounter. This extended relationship and contemplation encourages an awareness of place, and does not allow for the indifference of apathy.

Therefore, in many ways, what occurs through an aesthetic engagement is akin to a critical dialogue with place. This process can open the viewer to a dynamic personalized ethos of a particular place. As Kate Soper (1995) argues, “openness of this kind is not [one]... that tends to discount the validity of subjective experience... in favour of objective pronouncements” (p. 168). In an aesthetic engagement with place, the viewer experiences the material phenomenon of scapes, but just as importantly, she may also experience a reinvigorated consciousness of the meaning and value of those scapes. An engagement of this sort begs us to question the landscape – what is it comprised of – and how was it created? This form of inquiry can enable the viewer to find an individualized means to connect with a landscape.

### **The Practice of Aesthetic Engagement with Place**

I argue that aesthetic engagements with place may prove to be an effective tool for providing new perspectives of old identities – or new experiences of places that we think we already know. It may allow us to see sites that often go unseen, and reveal new ways of thinking about and experiencing the landscapes that we occupy. Perhaps this may even resonate on a larger scale, as a component of the discourse and strategy for our current global environmental crisis. Either way, aesthetic engagement with the landscape might just be one of the ways to develop a sensitivity and awareness for our environments – it might just end up being the way we get by.

In practical terms, these types of encounters may help to promote a new role for aesthetics in art education. By utilizing aesthetic engagement with place, we can further reveal the profound influence that place has on the very nature of our being. These types of encounters with the places we inhabit can also help us to understand the intersection between place and the development of collective identities, epistemologies, and responsibilities. In educational curriculums, aesthetic engagement with place can be used to turn our attention away from our individual selves, (which often seems to be the focus of so much current social media) and to be conscious of the world – instilling a sense of civic service. In doing so, aesthetic engagement with place becomes a method for producing new breeds of knowledge, new ways of being in the world, and ethical valuations of place.

Part of this argument is to also think beyond the human, to observe how aesthetic engagement can encourage a consideration of place that is more than our tacit connection, and beyond traditional relationships to place. Through an aesthetic engagement with place, we can begin to comprehend how places make evident their own wants and desires. Bill Brown (2001) broaches these concerns in his “thing theory” when he asks: “What claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things?” (p. 9) By looking at the world not only as a human product, we can then start down the path of acknowledging a world that does not merely exist for human exploitation, but rather one that requires greater strides in our efforts to mutually exist.



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