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Sculpturing sound in space

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A lived-in landscape becomes a place, which implies intimacy; a once lived-in landscape can be a place if explored, or remain a landscape if simply observed. (Lippard, 1997, p. 7)

Having an experience (introduction)

In September of 2016, place-based and socially concerned artist Suzanne Lacy’s collaborative art project *The Circle and the Square* (2015–17) took place in Brierfield, North West England. It was the culmination of 18 months of work, and took place as a three-day event, with a song performance from Sufi chanters and shape-note singers, an exhibition, and a banquet with 500 guests. This chapter, written in the first person, describes an embodied experience of the artwork as an experience of placemaking from the personal purview, and, in conversation with the artist, explores the aesthetical pursuit in Lacy’s work, fundamental in how Lacy approaches and prioritises within community-driven collaborations.

The American philosopher John Dewey argued in his 1934 book *Art as Experience* that having an experience differs from the ongoing stream of experience as such; our distractions, amusements, and desires. When having an experience, in contrast, the material of the experience reaches a completion; a problem reaches its solution, a chess game is completed, a book is written. An experience is therefore not something that just ended or stopped but is a fulfilment and a whole. We are used to thinking of the artist as the creator of this whole, through making choices, simplifying and amplifying experience based on their interest and subjective perspectives. In the context of the artwork, for Dewey, having an experience in a real sense is to go through all these same organisation procedures. The viewer, in order to have a real experience of the artwork, must – just like the artist who created it – arrange the elements in a whole. They are both, in Dewey’s terms, ‘doing and undergoing’ an experience.

For me, not trained in placemaking theories – quite the contrary in fact, as schooled in the philosophical direction of the Frankfurter school in general and in Adorno’s concept of autonomy in particular – Dewey’s insights were fruitful when trying to conceptualise the writing of a chapter about Lacy’s 2016 performance of *The Circle and the Square*, in a handbook about placemaking. I was interested in finding another ‘criticality,’ to borrow a term from theorist Irit Rogoff (2003), that was neither critique nor criticism: to classically ‘critique’ an art project that
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had been going on for 18 months, with a myriad of collaborations and stakeholders involved I knew would be impossible for me and uninteresting for the reader. As Rogoff writes, ‘The old boundaries between making and theorising, historicizing and displaying, criticising and affirming have long been eroded’ (ibid.). This said, a clearer ‘writing through art’ (ibid.) approach also suited lessons learnt throughout my Adornoian education; writing about an art work must take the form of the work very seriously, and to write about art is to let your writing be affected by what you write about, literally (Adorno, 1958/1991, pp. 3–4). Writing not ‘about,’ but ‘through’ Lacy’s performance in Brierfield is therefore an attempt to contemplate place as something other than environment, and to look at the factors that allows a non-distinctive approach to understanding one’s self and one’s place, as Lucy Lippard (1997) formulates it.

Situating place: arriving in Brierfield

As soon as I got off the train at the unstaffed Brierfield train station a building complex revealed itself as a massive cathedral in its rural Lancashire setting. Sat empty and idle, the former textile mill emphasised a historic significance for the small town built around this complex. I couldn’t help but think of losses, prompted by the shocking emptiness of abandoned industrial buildings, and here surrounded by a post-industrial small town with traditional ‘two-up two-down’ houses for its millworkers and grand detached houses of its mill owners of old along one main road. I have travelled from Oslo, Norway, to the Lancashire countryside, to Brierfield, which forms part of the Borough of Pendle in North West England, to see Suzanne Lacy’s then-new performance. The massive brick mill was one out of many built to develop the textile industry after the Leeds and Liverpool Canal was completed in 1816. When the mill was erected in 1832 the location itself was central, on the slope between the still vital Leeds and Liverpool Canal on the one side that was to supply the new industry’s need for water, and the city’s main street on the upper side. If you were in the main street you could see the distinctive English hills surrounding the industrial complex that was to lay the foundations for a Pendle of growth and progress. In a Wikipedia article, I learn that Brierfield Mill was one of the first steam-powered cotton spinning mills in the area, and in 1890 over 2,000 looms were in use and 91,000 spools (Wikipedia, n.d.). The Mill closed for production in 2007 after steady cuts and three years later the landmark became one of English Heritage’s ‘Listed Buildings at Risk.’ The area had long been known as the ‘dark corner’ of the land; the home of troubleshooters and disobedient and subversive forces (Poole, 2002, p. 88). The most famous story in the region is indisputably that of the sixteenth-century witchcraft cases, where a nine-year-old girl, Jennet Device, known as the Pendle Witch Child, testified against her entire family and, by doing so, lost them all. Today, this dark past is encapsulated in tourism, aided by the panoramic beauty of the hillsides that surround Pendle Hill, which is the highest point at 557m above sea level.

When I arrived on a cloudy September day, I could still glimpse the intact platforms that, until 1986, had served train rails in both directions. I had booked into the recommended Oaks Hotel, a large and venerable hotel a few miles from the main street. I don’t remember if I was carrying a bag or a suitcase, but I do remember the worn-out asphalt on the various pavements that constantly shifted from one side of the road to the other on the way to the hotel. There are dozens of cars driving back and forth, drivers looking straight ahead, eyes on the road. I am a foreigner here, but I am familiar with this type of topography from my upbringing in Northern Norway. Its logic, structure, its everyday and natural aesthetics seem familiar. The hotel had a new entrance, so I had to walk around the entire facility to find the original reception with tall dark oak panels along the walls of the main room, which ended in a stately staircase up to a small gallery where some guests were drinking tea. I had the impression that there were not
many guests. I was given the key to my room, which was large but worn and outdated, and got ready to go back to the historic mill where Suzanne Lacy was in charge for the next three days. An 18-month collaboration between the California-based artist and local artists, residents, and government officials was about to finally manifest as a work of art; a song performance, an installation, and a banquet with 500 invited guests.

A place turned space

The sparse information I find about the history of the area makes me feel unprepared for what is about to happen at the mill but I know this from the project text following the invitation to the collaborative event: after the mill closed in 2007, the small place lost its last hub, which means that the now-composed ethnic group of residents of the village no longer had their natural meeting place. 1962, the year of the Commonwealth, marked a start for the area as Pakistani workers moved from their home country to work in the textile industry along the Liverpool and the Leeds Canal. Together with the local white population, a working community was formed in the many mills along the canal. The Pakistani community that arrived in the 1960s worked with the local white working class, and the daughters and sons of the factory workers went to school together. All Brierfield residents had experienced great attachment and optimism had seen decline in recent years.

I feel a little nervous and expectant as I walk down the steep hill towards the mill. There is a group of people inside the factory gate. I don’t quite know where to go, where to direct my steps. I choose to go to one of several entrances and am thinking that the people I see live in the area, that they are local, here to watch the song performance orchestrated by the artist. They also look a little confused. Where are we going and when are they filming, we wonder, after reading various handwritten posters that give indications on how to stay out of camera shot? As we go up the stairs it becomes easier, arrows and tape on the floor indicate the direction. We understand that we are also in a film set. Then I see Suzanne. She smiles and gives me a hug and introduces me to several people standing around her. I remember no names afterwards, but I feel included. We are in the main room now, in the hall where the song performance is about to take place. The hall is as large and monumental as factory halls can be, with a long wall of windows looking onto the valley and the beautiful, picture-postcard hills. The concrete floors are worn, and the sun that floods through the glass of the old windows creates streaks of dust between the sharp white columns that fill the room. The walls are light turquoise, seemingly painted a long time ago. What a strange choice of colour, I think. Rows of foldable white chairs are placed in four rows against each other to form a square with a centre. When I arrive, one young man stands in the middle of the stage and more come to take a seat around him. Several cameras are placed around the room and microphones hang from the ceiling.

The performance is set to begin in two hours, and Suzanne says I can join her in the closed Town Hall they use as a working base and for meals, for the latest preparations or I can hear investors’ presentations of future plans for the mill, in one corner of the main room. I am not prepared for this ‘ingrediency’ in these – as I see it – aestheticized settings, but I choose the presentation, thinking it gives me a context that is not just historical. I stay through the presentation and understand that there is large investment to be made in Brierfield. The mill will be transformed into a hotel and apartments, recreational homes, pieds-à-terre for the large neighbouring cities. The beautiful view of the hills does not make it difficult to assume that the investment will yield a good return.

I learn that PEARL (Pendle Enterprise and Regeneration (Brierfield Mill) Ltd) owned the mill complex after Pendle Council bought it for £ 1.5 million from a private investor who had
originally intended to build a new school on the site, following the closure of the local school in 2007. The year in which local government bought the facility to develop it through the semi-public organization PEARL was the same year Brierfield Mill landed on English Heritage’s Listed Buildings at Risk in 2007.

**The performance**

I sit down with the small audience next to the stage placed in the middle of the main room. Now 40 men and women have entered the arranged lines of chairs into a square. They are shape-note singers from all over England. Shape–note is a singing tradition designed to facilitate congregational and community singing, popularised in the north of England from 1742 on by preacher John Nutall’s Lancashire sol-fa (sight) singing sessions (Willsdon and Sanromán, 2019, p. 240). The group face each other and start singing. Their voices are the only thing to be heard in the hall and the sound creates an instantaneous pressure of sound. One hand goes up and down while they sing, forming an accompaniment of harmonious movement to the naked, but strong, voices of the members of the choir.

I can sense the chair I sit on and lean into it, but I also feel the sound of the voices in my body. There is something happening now in the empty mill, with its peeling paint, the smell of mould, and the cold damp filled with sound. The song cuts through the surroundings and the body in those surroundings and touches some inner strings that suddenly tense up and recall some previous experiences of singing in similar settings, maybe it was a school aula, maybe it was a church. There’s something soothing about it, and familiar. I am reminded that we all have a voice – my neighbours, the person who lives down the road, my school mates, and my teachers; not just those who are authorized.

Now local Sufi chanters, all old and young Muslim men, are taking the stage after arranging the chairs in concentric circles, as opposed to the hollow square of the shape-note format. The young men choose to sit in the second row, with the oldest in the first. Before we hear anything, there is a dramatic visual change on the stage. The two groups of singers have their own distinct appearance. We are witnessing a quieter song, a prayer. It sounds like a kind of humming, but the words are: *La ilaha illAllah, La ilaha illAllah* (There is no deity but Allah). The acoustics created by the high ceiling and concrete floor accentuate the voices, and unlike the shape–note singing, they never go high in tone. It feels intense and intimate to be in the same room, as if the walls have crawled closer together to facilitate something private and personal. The song escalates, and the singers’ bodies move calmly and rhythmically from side to side, while breathing in in silence, and out with song.

There is something deeply spiritual about the song and how it is sung with closed eyes. Maybe it’s the voices together – the young, the old; that they share these intimate moments regularly, share spirituality. I think I have too few spiritual experiences. I am reminded of similar spiritual involvement. The view from the mountain, that allows being able to see really far, when the eye strives to see variations far away, to identify what you see; the eye muscle, unused to it; the cornea’s experience of something unexpected that sends other signals to the brain, and changes it.

It is always hard to say how much one needs to know about the context to have an experience of an artwork, but it helps that I know that Suzanne saw singing as a key tool to rebuild relationships in the now-divided community. It feels poignant, and it touches me on an emotional level, primarily through the voices and the two groups of singers coming together in the abandoned mill. I understand immediately how the song – from both traditions performed here – can serve as a common ground. It is hard – I would say almost impossible – to write about this
without using a pretentious or idealistic language; then again, art history is full of praise of art works that managed to cut through history, to operate beyond the here and now.

My point of view becomes anthropological, I observe, while I suddenly also seem to participate to a small extent. Participation is unexpected, and my role becomes unstable. This reflection is shared by all art reviewers present; at least from *Hyperallergic* (Sheerin, 2016) and *Frieze* (Robertson 2016). They both describe the feeling of participating abruptly, getting dragged, to a greater or lesser extent, into the process of a project that has been going on for a long time, a close collaboration with local artist groups and commissioners (In Situ and Super Slow Way, arts organisations). I am also reminded of Palestinian artist Sandi Hilal, who through the work *Living Room* (2016–ongoing; visibleproject.org) changes the host–guest relationship by facilitating the migrant’s ability to take on the host role and thus gain power. The work is informed by Hilal’s long experience of living in exile.

The banquet I do not go to feels like an important component of the art production, as are the various activities that have taken place during the 18 months prior to this performance. Another available component is the 65 interviews conducted by mill employees and their family members, shown on screens in the mill. In the main room I can see about a dozen, and they give me – through the testimonies – a more direct access to the experience of working conditions and culture in the mill: the soundscapes from the time when it was at full activity, including the sounds that filled the streets of the village just before the mill would open its doors in the early morning.

**Reflecting on the performance, London, March 2019**

Notes to self:

Every time she [Lacy] gathers and talks about her work, it is as if a kind of excellence is emerging, as if (for Europeans) the American unfiltered directness is stepping aside and a genuinely expertly founded commitment takes place throughout the body. The back is straight, the voice is lower, strangely enough, but clearly, something is at stake. This repeats, I observe, every time we talk about her art. In transitions from more practical tasks like ordering a meal, finding the itineraries (always more options!). Wherever we go, Lacy can appear more impatient, yes, unpalatable. But as soon as we talk about her art, she puts herself in another notch. It impresses me. We sat down in a hotel café to do the interview about the Brierfield project. We spend time on the recorder, we are unsure if it will be strong enough since the café is busy and noisy. For a moment I wonder if we should find ourselves another place. We stay. Decide that it will work well enough.

She says I can’t write down what she says in the text. She recommends that I write it myself, base my article on the interview as a material of preparation. She is going through this change I have seen several times now, and it is as if she is giving a lecture to me, where each sentence creates a deeper and deeper understanding of the audience. I note and nod, asking my questions: I ask her how much of the ‘result’ she envisions beforehand, when she started a project like this. I ask her how she orientates herself, how does she read and understand the place to work with and from? Is her approach intuitive or strategic or both? What is she looking for, who are typical informants and who are typical collaborators? How does she inform herself about various agendas, here the client, the developer, the local production group?

It is now almost four years since I was present at the performance, so how do I look back on it? What do I remember and what have I forgotten? I am currently preoccupied with Walter
In bringing together two song traditions, both local but with very different traditions and cultures, Lacy took an active approach to negotiating space – what we can see from outside – and
place – from where we act, from where we work. The mill used to be a place but became an (empty) space. By opening it up again for the former workers and the community at large, a restart of a conversation was made possible, in a limited period of time before developers took over. Lippard empathises, in The Lure of the Local, that if reflections on social affiliation are incorporated into participatory art projects, then they have the opportunity to gain collective and shared experiences about the place. It is, for Lippard, not to see the place as an ‘environment’ or something around ourselves, but that we ourselves (also) create the place. Not accepting a distinction between one’s self and one’s place is a beginning. Lacy’s methodology never goes easy on audience participation nor the co-creation of the ‘image’ (the two song traditions coming together: yet it is hard to overlook the fact that it is the artist’s sense of space and aesthetic intuition in orchestrating that space (co-)creates the deep emotional possibility of identification and human solidarity among both local participants and transient arts professionals.

References


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Jonathan Jae-an Crisman

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Jason F. Kovacs and Hayun Park

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Dave Lowenstein

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