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Drawing-in-situ: material encounters with place

In 'Species of Spaces' the writer George Perec describes the complexities of articulating spatial experience as a form of conquest (Perec 1977). The act of drawing in or from the landscape, where materials witness site as a mirror to nature, provide the kind of speculative encounter that Perec may have been alluding to. In this sense, the materiality of drawing has the ability to expand our relational understanding of the world around us. This text explores two such encounters made through the author's own drawings, in response to diametrically opposed sites in the east and west of England. In both works discussed, the process of making centres on the fusion of photographic image with raw drawing matter (such as charcoal dust or agricultural lime), either adhered directly onto the surface of the picture plane or invested into the fabric of the paper surface through absorption.

In 2008, I began thinking about the *conditions* for site-specific drawing in the context of work by artists such as Richard Serra, Anna Barriball and Nobuo Sekine. I developed a body of hybrid drawings that combined photographic record with drawing material in response to sites along the north Cornish coast. I was particularly interested in how the material 'stuff' of drawing could be disaggregated from the subjectivity of looking, in much the same way perhaps that paint had freed itself from its subjugation to imagery in the twentieth century. The notion of drawing's material trace as a form of archive, opened up questions about the relationship between the uninhabited spaces I was recording at the time, the external conditions in which I was making the work, and the materials I was using to transcribe them. Jacques Derrida provides a useful perspective of this inside/outside relationship in his essay *Parergon*, by considering the frame or edge of the subject, as critical in our understanding of the whole (Derrida 1987). What is our focus in the landscape where a narrative is formed only by that which is no longer present?

During the development of the Cornish works, spending time with the landscape slowly unveiled an uneasy tension between these landscapes and their context "as both a witness and archivist for the uncanny" (Fieldsend-Danks, 2008: 27). I made extensive drawings in and around the small fishing hamlet of Port Quin, using a journal to combine drawing, photographic images and observational notes. It became clear that the attractiveness of these sites as places of relaxation and visual pleasure, would often appear to exist in parallel with a sense of something other, of a storm brewing far out to sea, or the spectre of hidden histories; as places of loss or remembrance perhaps. The symbiotic relationship between pleasure and tragedy is deeply felt on the North Cornish coast, where maritime disasters, wrecks and lost communities provide the unseen motif for the beautiful landscape that witnessed

them. *Untitled (Boscastle)* (Figure 1.) responds in part to the seemingly impossible navigation to the safety of this narrow inlet. The great rock that asserts its prowess in the harbour entrance by day, quietly submerges into the soft velvet black of the Cornish night sky making navigation near impossible. Understanding these rich contexts felt in some way akin to a form of narrative mining, an approach described by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* as an “excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface” (Schama 1995: 14).

This reciprocity between material and place formed the basis of further investigative works in which both landscape image (as archive) and material from the site (as object), could be co-opted into the same pictorial space. I became interested in the notion that a drawing (albeit in a hybridized form) could be both noun and verb, positioning presentation over representation. In phenomenological terms, the process of considering making drawing in this way became inseparable from its objecthood. In 2014, I began a new series of works that set out to document the seasonal intervention of mounds of agricultural lime within the open landscape of North Norfolk. Heaped like giant mounds of drawing chalk, they are curiously reminiscent in form to the earlier studies of Cornish rocks. I was reminded of John Latham’s 1975 proposal for a land work titled *Derelict Land Art: Five Sisters*, the result of a period of time spent on a placement with the Scottish Development Office. According to the Tate, Latham recognized that the ‘bings’ (huge heaps of coal waste) “had an ‘immaculate and classical nature’, recommending they be preserved as monuments and thus eliminating the need for their costly removal” (Tate 2016).

From a distance, the Norfolk deposits commonly used to maintain correct PH levels prior to sowing crops, assume the grandeur and scale of a displaced mountain range; a counter intuitive phenomenon amidst the relative flatness of the East Anglian countryside. These micro mountains are quickly colonized by new growth, before eventually being drawn onto the plane of the landscape through mechanized agricultural processes. The metamorphic process through which the white lime is dispersed onto the landscape mirrors the indelible relationship that drawing has with the flat plane of the paper surface. The making of *Colony (Erpingham)* (Figure 2.) formed part of a series of works on paper that combined archival photographs with chalk residue and mineral deposits from the site.

These drawings, both connected by a shared motif, record the momentary convergence of image and quiescent drawing material in response to the lived experience of being in the landscape. As such, these drawings are not representations of place but rather a presentation of a material encounter arrested only by the limiting conditions of the paper’s edge. As darkness falls, the harbour rock dissolves into night. The chalk mountain no longer exists.

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Figure 1: Paul Fieldsend-Danks (2008). Untitled (Boscastle). Charcoal and
photograph on Fabriano paper. © Paul Fieldsend-Danks.



Figure 2: Paul Fieldsend-Danks (2014). Colony (Erpingham). Chalk, agricultural lime
and archival digital print on Somerset paper. © Paul Fieldsend-Danks.

