



‘HOW DARE YOU RUBBISH MY TOWN!’: PLACE LISTENING AS AN APPROACH TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART WITHIN UK URBAN REGENERATION CONTEXTS

Elaine Speight

In this essay Speight outlines ‘place listening’ as a cosmopolitan approach to socially engaged art practice within contexts of urban change. Informed by Doreen Massey’s concept of a ‘global sense of place’, place listening stands in opposition to dominant models of public art as well as certain critical art practices, which are predicated upon essentialist readings of place. Speight argues that by failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which places are experienced, such practices negate the agency of people by suppressing more complex narratives. In response, place listening seeks to reveal more contradictory and empowered readings through embodied, relational and sustained engagement with and within specific places. The essay focuses on Palimpsest, an art project designed by Speight herself that took place in West Bromwich, a town that has been portrayed as an exhausted victim of mobile global capital, leading to accusations of misrepresentation and prompting one West Bromwich resident to exclaim, ‘How dare you rubbish my town!’ By examining the methods employed within Palimpsest, particularly urban walking, Speight explores how place listening might enable the expression of more nuanced and cosmopolitan senses of place.

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(Elaine Speight, Birkbeck College London)

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Abstract

In this essay Speight outlines 'place listening' as a cosmopolitan approach to socially engaged art practice within contexts of urban change. Informed by Doreen Massey's concept of a 'global sense of place', place listening stands in opposition to dominant models of public art as well as certain critical art practices, which are predicated upon essentialist readings of place. Speight argues that by failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which places are experienced, such practices negate the agency of people by suppressing more complex narratives. In response, place listening seeks to reveal more contradictory and empowered readings through embodied, relational and sustained engagement with and within specific places. The essay focuses on Palimpsest, an art project designed by Speight herself that took place in West Bromwich, a town that has been portrayed as an exhausted victim of mobile global capital, leading to accusations of misrepresentation and prompting one West Bromwich resident to exclaim, 'How dare you rubbish my town!' By examining the methods employed within Palimpsest, particularly urban walking,

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Within the popular imagination, the concept of globalisation tends to conjure up emotive images of exploitation and degradation: Indian children stitching T-shirts to be sold overseas for less than the price of a cup of coffee, devastated rainforests, and the enforced displacement of whole local communities to accommodate polluting factories or mass-industrial agriculture. However, as Doreen Massey (1994) attests in *Space, Place and Gender*, for the majority of people in the Western world the experience of globalisation is a much more nuanced and prosaic affair. Furthermore, rather than invariably eroding customary ways of life, globalisation frequently presents new opportunities for action and agency, for example through advances in communication technologies and the expansion of global networks. Yet, despite this, I would suggest that many artistic approaches to globalisation are predicated upon what Nigel Thrift describes as 'a narrative of beleaguered-ness, in which everyday life is gradually being crushed by forces outside its control' (Thrift, 2004, p.54). This is particularly true of certain types of art practice which have emerged over the last ten years in connection with the regeneration of British towns and cities. These practices can generally be categorised into two main approaches. In the first, as an officially appointed 'placemaker', the artist seeks to locate and re-insert the locally specific meanings and 'senses of place' whose survival are perceived to be jeopardised by the regeneration process. In the second, however, the artist adopts the role of a critical commentator, for whom the redevelopment of certain places provides a lens through which to tell wider stories about the effects of urban governance and globalisation.

In this essay, I claim that, while these approaches are positioned differently in relation to urban regeneration processes, they are both informed by an anxiety about globalisation as a homogenising and destructive force, resulting from a popular essentialist reading of place that emphasises notions of rootedness, boundaries and singular identities. My argument is that by failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which places are experienced, such practices negate the agency of individuals by casting places as the passive and powerless victims of global capital. In response I want to outline the alternative approach of 'place listening', which I have been working towards in my own practice as an artist and curator. By describing aspects of *Palimpsest*, a project that I developed in the Midlands town of West Bromwich, I will examine how embodied

and relational methods – specifically urban walking – can facilitate the expression of more complex senses of place.

'Place listening' is an approach that I have been developing within my practice over the last four years in response to experiences of working within contexts of urban change. Specifically, it has grown out of a frustration with what I perceive to be the superficial and cynical approach to the municipal commissioning of art within urban regeneration schemes. At the same time this approach also provides an alternative to the often equally one-dimensional critiques of place and urban change that have characterised some responses to regeneration from within mainstream critical art practice. Although I have coined the term 'place listening', it encompasses a number of features that can be identified within the work of many other artists and curators. In particular, it involves a sustained, embodied and relational approach, which reflects the way in which places are experienced or 'sensed'. Above all, place listening seeks to challenge the dominant model of place-making, and the assumptions about place that inform it. Associated with the redevelopment of urban places, place-making has had a profound influence upon the commissioning of public art since the early 2000s. Although rarely defined, the term has become shorthand for the practice of 'creating somewhere with a distinct identity' (Cowan, 2005, p.292) through an on-the-ground approach to urban design and planning. In particular, place-making advocates the involvement of communities and the application of local knowledge as ways to engender local distinctiveness and a strong sense of place within urban regeneration schemes.

Endorsed by the New Labour government since the late 1990s, the concept of place-making as a method for creating distinctive places continues to inform urban policy. In particular, the commissioning of participatory or socially engaged art practices, alongside more traditional object-based approaches to public art, has become regarded as a type of place-making tool. As well as injecting places with 'vitality' (Landry et al, 1996, p.21) these practices are seen as a low-cost way to create a distinctive and 'authentic' sense of place within otherwise generic developments (Holding, 2008, p.16). Within this context artists are employed to locate, represent and enhance the existing meanings of a place that is undergoing change. The resulting image of the artist as a 'placemaker' began to gain currency at the beginning of the new millennium as part of wider discourses surrounding the role of art within urban regeneration. When New Labour came to power in the late 1990s, many inner-city communities were suffering the effects of industrial

decline including high unemployment, poor housing, and forms of deprivation and social disadvantage which were described as 'social exclusion'. By addressing the social problems associated with such areas, and using public funds to pump-prime private investment, the government hoped to successfully regenerate Britain's inner cities. Central to this endeavour was the task of encouraging middle-class communities, who had fled to the suburbs, to return to the city centre. To this end, the government set up a body called the Urban Task Force (UTF) to 'identify causes of urban decline in England and recommend practical solutions to bring people back into our cities, towns and urban neighbourhoods' (UTF, 1999, p.2).

In their 1999 report, UTF outlined the concept of an 'urban renaissance' as a way to describe the transformation of Britain's downtrodden inner cities into distinctive and exciting destinations, capable of attracting new, wealthier residents and other forms of investment. According to UTF, urban renaissance was not simply a matter of policy, but necessitated a new approach to urbanism, which was concerned with generating the 'vitality that makes urban living desirable' (p.3). Place-making became seen as an effective way to improve the external perceptions of blighted areas and to transform them into attractive places. The commissioning of art was regarded as an integral part of this process. In 2004 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published a report entitled 'Culture at the Heart of Regeneration' which claimed that the involvement of artists within regeneration schemes could enhance the 'quality of life' in an area, by creating a 'strong sense of place' (DCMS, 2004, p.22).

In particular, place-making was believed to provide a defence against the threat of homogenisation, posed by standardised approaches to architecture and urban design, and the dominance of multinational companies. In 2005 the New Economics Foundation (NEF) published an influential report, which claimed that the increasing presence of chain stores was transforming Britain's high streets into 'bland identikit' locations. According to NEF, this was not merely an aesthetic concern, but a situation that entailed serious social, cultural and economic implications. 'The death of diversity undermines democracy', it was argued, and it 'attacks our sense of place and belonging and therefore well-being. It hands power to an unaccountable corporate elite; ultimately pulling apart the rich weave of natural systems upon which our livelihoods and the economy depend' (NEF, 2005, p.5). As a place-making tool art became regarded as a way to counteract such effects, by furnishing places with a unique identity which would distinguish them from other locations (Landry

et al., 1996, p.3). This approach was not new, but has informed the commissioning of public art since at least the mid-1900s. For example, Tom Finkelpearl describes how the first United States *Percent for art* law,¹ which was passed in 1959 under the title 'Aesthetic Ornamentation of City Structure', was developed to combat the perceived homogeneity of modernist architecture and to create new urban identities (Finkelpearl, 2001, pp.20–21). Similarly, Ronald Lee Fleming describes how, alongside urban design, art was used to reanimate the 'dead spaces that tell no tales', which resulted from the dominant *tabula rasa* model of urban planning during the 1970s (Fleming, 2007, p.19).

The homogenisation of urban places is widely perceived as one of the main effects of globalisation, and it remains a significant source of anxiety (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.155). In relation to place-making I would suggest that this anxiety stems from a particular reading of place, which is prevalent amongst artists, urban planners, public art commissioners and policymakers alike. This interpretation of place has its roots in the teaching of Martin Heidegger and the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which strives to discover the true 'essence' of experience. Phenomenology posits that knowledge is produced through direct encounters with the world, which are characterised by 'intentionality', that is, the subject's intention to make use of, or interact with, another object or person (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.xix). Intentionality generates meaning through the relationships it produces between individuals and the world around them, and is central to phenomenological readings of place. Unlike abstract space, place is perceived as a focal point of human existence – a hub of intentionality which makes sense of the world. Therefore, as Edward Relph declares, 'the essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence' (Relph, 2008, p.43). Consequently, the sites of greatest intentionality, such as those associated with childhood or other formative experiences, are thought to engender feelings of belonging.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1990) has described this affective attachment to place as 'topophilia' – literally, a love of place – which can occur in connection to any place that provides the location for an intense or vivid emotional encounter. According to Relph, however, the places to which we grow most attached are those towards

which we develop a deep familiarity and identification, a condition that he calls 'rootedness': 'To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular' (Relph, 2008, p.38). Such notions of rootedness are associated with the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*. Roughly translated as 'dwelling', this is described as the essence of being: 'the manner in which we humans are on the earth' (Heidegger, 2001, p.145). Dwelling is not simply a matter of being located in a place, but implies an ongoing process of maintenance and care, involving practices of cultivation and construction, which Heidegger terms *bauen* or 'building' (pp.144–5). An essentialist reading of place, therefore, conceives it as a site of rootedness and belonging, which is enhanced through ongoing acts of preservation and building that constitute a process of dwelling.

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of this approach, particularly in relation to the redevelopment of places and the processes of globalisation. As Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose point out, an essentialist reading of place offers a sense of dependability, safety and 'anchorage' in the face of instability and change (Massey and Rose, 2003, p.3). Furthermore, the continued existence of meaningful places offers a form of resistance against the effects of homogenisation. By attending to notions of identity, place-making can therefore be seen as an attempt to create places that provide a stable point of reference within a constantly changing world.

Nevertheless, critics such as David Harvey have claimed that an understanding of place as something that is fixed, bounded and unchanging is fundamentally incompatible with a globalised world (Harvey, 1996, pp.291–326). Instead, the increasing mobility of people, money and information severs the expansion of roots in a place, eliminates boundaries and changes spatial relations. Therefore, deliberate attempts to create distinctive places can be seen to derive from a perverted form of what Manuel Castells calls 'resistance identity' which refers to the practice of enhancing aspects of identity that differ from the dominant forms as a way to resist social stigma or marginalisation (Castells, 2004, pp.8–9). However, the use of traditional symbols, histories or practices to create a particular sense of place could also be seen as a cynical attempt to suppress alternative identities. Likewise, concepts of rootedness and dwelling can easily become synonymous with the right to be in a place, and be used to discriminate against people who are deemed not to belong (Harvey, 1996, pp.314–5).

¹ *Percent for art* is a programme through which city authorities ask developers for a contribution – typically around one percent of the capital construction costs of a new development – to fund the production and installation of public artworks.

According to Harvey, the desire to imbue places with meaning through the commissioning of art can hence be understood as a reactionary response to the perceived vulnerability of place within the contemporary capitalist world (p.297). As information technologies and global transport rapidly developed towards the end of the twentieth century, the structure of society was perceived to change from a 'space of places' to a 'space of flows' (Castells, 2010, pp.453–60). The nature of place was perceived to shift from individual sites of identity and meaning to porous locations that were no more than intersections within the transport and information infrastructures facilitating the flow of capital (Harvey, 1996, p.296). This provoked anxiety about the instability of place, leading critics to ask 'what is *place* in the new "in-between" world?' According to Thrift, 'the short answer is – compromised: permanently in a state of enunciation, between addresses, always deferred. Places are stages of intensity, traces of movement, speed and circulation... There is, in other words, no stability in the stopping place' (Thrift, 1996, pp.289–90).

In this sense, then, rather than hubs of 'intentionality' or meaning places are nothing more than sites of 'fixed capital embedded in the land' (Harvey, 1996, p.295). Furthermore, as the systems of capital accumulation – including production, sales and distribution, marketing and finance – become progressively mobile and are able to attach themselves to a wide choice of locations, places are forced to differentiate themselves in increasingly competitive ways (pp.297–8). Within this context, rather than a socially motivated practice, place-making can be seen as a predominantly economic activity, designed to attract capital investment by enhancing and exploiting the unique characteristics of a place. This is not to suggest that the intentions of the artist, commissioner, urban planner, or indeed policymaker are purely, if at all, economic but rather that the essentialist readings of place, which underpin a place-making approach, facilitate such agendas. The approach can also entail a number of social and ethical problems in relation to particular places. Notably, the perceived presence of certain attributes in a place can instigate processes of gentrification which inflate land values attracting wealthier groups while displacing less affluent ones. Moreover, as Harvey attests, the drive to produce marks of distinction tends to suppress more complex narratives of place and, ironically, often ends up replicating the very homogeneity that place-making seeks to resist (Harvey, 1996, p.298).

In contrast, the notion of place listening offers a way to uncover and acknowledge some of the experiences of place that are overlooked or suppressed by place-

making schemes. In doing so, it seeks to discover more nuanced and empowered responses to globalisation that can challenge and allay the fear of homogenisation. Rather than giving in to an essentialist reading, place listening is informed by a conception of place as an ongoing and contingent process. Specifically, it is influenced by Massey's concept of a 'global sense of place' (Massey, 1994, pp.146–56; 1993, pp.59–69). According to Massey, rather than relying on aspects of local distinctiveness, a sense of place is produced through the 'meeting and weaving together' (1994, p.154) of different social relations. Far from threatening its inherent specificities, then, the global relations that connect a place to other people, times and locations are what constitute its identity. 'The uniqueness of a place, or locality', Massey asserts, 'is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself' (Massey, 1993, p.66).

This notion of place as a meeting point requires an alternative approach to art practice. According to Massey and Rose, the '*challenge of place*' (2003, p.4) within this context is not to engender a cohesive identity as place-making seeks to do, but to attend to the negotiations of difference through which places are produced. This necessitates what Nikos Papastergiadis describes as a 'cosmopolitan imaginary' (Papastergiadis, 2012, pp.101–4) where, rather than translating the meanings of a place, the artist is actively engaged in a process of 'world making' (p.91). As a form of 'social praxis' (p.181), a cosmopolitan art practice seeks to open up a discursive space within which different experiences and perspectives can be acknowledged and explored. As Papastergiadis explains, art 'does not possess a fixed knowledge of things, but rather develops a critical attitude towards the possibilities in and between things. Art begins in curiosity, the sensuous attraction towards difference and connection, and proceeds through a relational mode of thinking that serves simultaneously as an instrument for suspending the existing order of things and as a platform for imagining alternatives' (p.13).

This kind of cosmopolitan imaginary can be found in the practices of a number of artists who approach places as the sites of complex relations and future possibilities. Nils Norman's work, for instance, subverts the language of urban planners and property developers through the use of maps, models, diagrams and computer-generated imagery to present alternative

visions for the redevelopment of a place. In so doing, he creates a 'layered and complicated dialogue about a site, urban planning and the possible alternatives' (Norman, 2010, p.98). In another example, Christian Nold's *Bio Mapping* project uses a combined Global Positioning System (GPS) and biometric sensor device to map the embodied and emotional intimate experiences that shape people's encounters with a place (Nold, 2009). The 'Emotional Maps' produced through this process highlight the impact of urban planning upon embodied experiences of a place and suggest alternative approaches. Finally, through a more overtly activist practice, the artist group Platform have spent almost thirty years exposing the social and ecological effects of global power relations from their base in the Tidal Thames Valley of London. By forming networks of interest around local issues, the group intervene within processes of governance to produce tangible effects in their area (see Marriott, 2008).

Place listening utilises similar imaginary, embodied and durational approaches as ways of 'sensing' a place. In particular, it involves the construction of various social and relational spaces, within which individual and collective experiences of a place can be expressed, re-enacted and discussed. These diverse narratives present a challenge to the essentialist readings of place that inform the model of place-making. As such, place listening could be said to possess what Papastergiadis describes as an 'aesthetics of resistance' (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.97). Unlike the political art practices that emerged in the 1970s, which sought to expose the internal mechanisms and agendas of hegemonic power structures, place listening is concerned with 'producing' rather than 'simply reflecting' knowledge (p.101). 'A critical stance is defined not simply by claiming to be standing outside or against power', Papastergiadis writes, 'but also by finding ways to rework the meaning and form of power through collaborating with the public. The point of art is not the exposure of the truth but the creation of public situations for reimagining reality' (p.97).

In the following I will outline how a cosmopolitan approach to place can facilitate the expression of individual forms of agency, which tend to be negated by more oppositional types of art practice. By presenting aspects of *Palimpsest*, a project that I developed in the Midlands town of West Bromwich, I intend to demonstrate how relational, embodied and durational methods can both reveal and enable particular types of resistance in relation to urban change. In particular I will describe how the use of walking as a creative method allows people to present and produce their own forms of knowledge about a place, and to imagine

its possible futures, as 'epistemic partners' within the creative process.

Palimpsest was a multifaceted project, developed over an eighteen-month period. It consisted of a series of activities and events, including the production of an audio tour of West Bromwich town centre. The project began in October 2010 when I was selected to take part in the Longhouse Action Research programme, a six-month annual scheme run by the West Bromwich arts organisation, Multistory. Multistory encourage early-career artists to discover alternative contexts for their practice and to trial new approaches without the pressure to deliver a final 'end product' or artwork. Although the scheme is specifically aimed at artists who work in 'the public realm', there is no expectation for the artists to base their projects within West Bromwich. However, the town provided the perfect context in which to develop my practice.

West Bromwich is a small town in the borough of Sandwell approximately five miles northwest of Birmingham, UK. In many ways it could be viewed as a rather ordinary, slightly downtrodden post-industrial town. Dating back to at least the ninth century, the town expanded in the 1800s as a centre for coal mining and the manufacturing of nails, guns and springs. However, its industries were damaged by the economic recessions of the 1970s and 1980s and as a result the town suffers from high levels of unemployment and other associated problems. Yet although the recent recession brought the regeneration of many similar places to a standstill, when I first visited West Bromwich in 2010 it was in the early stages of one of the largest redevelopment schemes in the country. The reason for this was that the regeneration was led not by the government, but by Tesco. Planned since the late 1990s, it involved the redevelopment of residential streets to the north of the existing town centre to accommodate what was rumoured to be the largest Tesco store in Europe. To secure planning permission for their 540,000 square foot leisure and retail complex, Tesco had funded a £200 million regeneration scheme, which included a new police station and college. The scheme was also designed to connect with an earlier stage of the town's redevelopment, which began in the early 2000s with the construction of the controversial arts centre, The Public. Designed by the renowned British architect, Will Alsop, The Public was devised as a new landmark for West Bromwich. However, it ended up as an over-budget, initially underused and widely derided project regarded by some West Bromwich residents as an unacceptable waste of money.

On my first visit to the town, I expected to encounter a heightened level of resistance towards the Tesco scheme. However, the general attitude of the people that I spoke to was one of hesitant optimism. While people in Inverness protested and Bristol residents rioted, the people of West Bromwich spoke of convenience, choice and much-needed employment. These attitudes were sharply contrasted by artistic accounts of the scheme developed through a programme of artworks and events entitled 'Black Country Creative Advantage'. This was a research project run jointly by the University of Wolverhampton and Multistory, and designed to ask questions about the regeneration process. Unsurprisingly, the Tesco scheme provided the main context for many of the artworks, which variously presented it as source of environmental pollution, an example of corporate harm, or a giant sinkhole within the centre of the town.

Yet as pointed out by the programme's curator, Monika Vykoukal, the image of West Bromwich as a victim of corporate exploitation was not necessarily recognised, nor welcomed, by the town's residents. Commenting on the conference that concluded the 'Creative Advantage' project, Vykoukal describes how the artistic portrayal of the town as an exhausted and exploited victim of global capital provoked an angry outburst from a member of the audience:

■ Neil Gray's film focused on the Tesco development and its relation to the other main developments in West Bromwich, the housing schemes on The Lyng and The Public, as "uneven urban (under) developments", and thus "part of a wider process of neo-liberal urbanism". His suggestion that the regeneration process can be understood as a deliberate destruction having left the town a wasteland led to an impassioned debate with local writer and actor Suzan Spence, who challenged this reading from the perspective of the day to day experience of local residents, which is not entirely dominated by developments in this manner. Or, to put it more simply "How dare you rubbish my town?" ♣

(Vykoukal, 2010, p.4)

Spence's protest against the depiction of West Bromwich as a passive victim of capitalist development, as well as the general popular acceptance of the scheme, could be described as examples of what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) terms 'misrecognition'. Associated with the Marxist concept of 'false consciousness', this is a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1993, p.121) where the powerful conceal their true agendas beneath a 'veil of symbolic relations' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.136)

that inspires conformity among subjugated groups. In particular, the optimistic talk of employment and opportunities could be seen to derive from Tesco's attempts to reframe the development as a socially motivated process, designed to generate 'a new sense of pride' and 'jobs for the community'.² The work of left-wing artists such as Gray could therefore be seen as an attempt to remove the scales from people's eyes and to present the realities of urban redevelopment that misrecognition conceals.

In contrast I would suggest that, rather than liberating people through a process of enlightenment, such approaches overlook local forms of agency. In his critique of left-wing interpretations of neoliberalism Clive Barnett (2005) suggests that narratives of misrecognition advance a 'simplistic' view of the world by setting up a binary division between hegemony and subversion. Furthermore, they fail to explain how such deception works, or to account for the ways in which it can be resisted. Therefore, rather than emerging as autonomous agents, members of the public tend to be depicted as passive subjects who, aside from visible forms of dissent, have no recourse against misrecognition. Similarly, although they undoubtedly provide an important political critique, artworks such as those produced through the Creative Advantage scheme present places like West Bromwich and their residents as the helpless victims of globalisation. In doing so, they inhibit more productive types of discourse surrounding the resilient and empowered ways in which people negotiate change.

As an experiment in place listening, *Palimpsest* was an attempt to locate and acknowledge some of the narratives of place that tend to be overlooked by place-making and related critical art practices. Specifically, it was designed to examine how people who lived or spent time in West Bromwich negotiated the town's redevelopment and expressed a sense of place against the backdrop of such profound change. To do this, I employed various methods of walking including 'talking whilst walking' (Anderson, 2004), an audio walk, and live guided tours around the town centre. By engaging people within an embodied and open-ended investigation, I sought to create a space in which various experiences and senses of place could be articulated and explored.

The use of walking as a creative practice is not unusual and can be located within a number of socially engaged practices which have developed since the early 2000s. According to Andrea Phillips (2005, p.511), its attraction lies in its status as a 'weak activity', which

² These phrases appeared on banners that surrounded the Tesco construction site.

involves elements of uncertainty and chance, and allows artists 'to avoid stabilizing or reifying forms of representation' by adopting the position of the Other:

Walking has enchanted us precisely because of its own unfinished nature, because it does not seem to acquire a regulatory air, because it is a proposal, not even a maquette or a map, that which Giorgio Agamben would call a "means without end". It offers no problematic resolution, and so ties in with a whole series of philosophical strategies of undoing, evading, revoking the legislative. It is enchanting because it offers a way of "writing" the landscape that does not seem to be colonial; that does not striate. ▀

(p.509)

As an embodied and sensory activity, walking also allows the artist to develop his or her own sense of place. Paul Rodaway describes how the two interpretations of sense – 'making sense' through 'order and understanding', and the 'sensation or feeling' experienced through the human senses – are closely aligned and sometimes implied by each other (Rodaway, 1994, p.5). As such, walking engenders a certain insight into a place through a sensual engagement with it. Moreover, walking with other people can reveal the otherwise invisible emotional, temporal, geographical and social connections that constitute senses of place and exist outside the totalising narratives of exploitation and rebellion. As a creative method, therefore, walking could be said to facilitate a 'cosmopolitan imagination' where the existence of other possibilities and meanings become apparent through an understanding of oneself as 'wholly embedded within the world' (Meskimmon, 2011, p.8).

During the early stages of *Palimpsest* I took walks with twelve individuals with different relationships to West Bromwich. These included an amateur historian, an urban planner, a poet, a retired person who had spent all her life in the town, an archaeologist, two receptionists, a teacher, and other people who lived or worked there. Although the posters, which these people had responded to, invited them to 'take a walk with me', the onus was on them to direct a walk around the centre of the town. As a result, the walks varied in length from fifteen minutes to over two hours. They also included a range of different routes and various types of walks, such as a trip to the bank, a visit to a hospital garden, a historic tour of the town, a trip to an archaeological dig and a stroll around The Public. For some people, the selection of a route appeared to be straightforward; for others, the decision about where to walk required a great

deal of thought and in some cases was a source of anxiety. According to Sarah Pink, such self-conscious forms of walking can be understood as attempts at 'making place' through the representation of particular 'routes of movement' (Pink, 2008, pp.1–4). As the walks progressed, it became clear that many of my guides were keen to present me with a wholly positive image of the town by shaping my experiences of it. Furthermore, the presence of a microphone, which I used to record conversations during the walks, seemed to encourage people to assume a performative role, as a type of West Bromwich 'representative'. For example, they would often adopt a formal tone and provide detailed descriptions of what they felt were the town's attributes, such as its historic architecture, whilst ignoring its less appealing aspects.

Yet while the majority of walks were pre-planned and performed, they also encouraged the spontaneous expression of more candid narratives of place. Jon Anderson describes how 'talking whilst walking' can reveal the temporal nature of people's relationship with a place, by accessing 'the non-mechanistic framework of the mind ... to recall episodes and meanings buried in the archaeology of knowledge' (Anderson, 2004, p.260). The act of walking along certain streets, or past particular landmarks, often prompted people to recount personal histories or specific memories connected to the place, which they sometimes claimed to have forgotten. Moreover, where a person had not visited the town centre for some time, the juxtaposition between the place as they remembered it and its present condition often elicited an emotional response, which usually then led to a discussion about the wider changes taking place in West Bromwich town centre as a result of the Tesco scheme.

Through this process of talking whilst walking I began to gain a sense of some of the complex, and sometimes contradictory, feelings that people had towards the redevelopment of their town. On the one hand, many of the individuals with whom I walked expressed sadness about the demolition of historic or significant buildings to make way for the Tesco development. However, at the same time, some people also conveyed what John Urry describes as a 'drudgery of place' (Urry, 2007, p.260), a sense of being trapped somewhere that is outdated and unchanging. As Anita, a hotel receptionist who lives in the town, explained, 'it's dead, it's dry ... It's like it's lost in time. There's no reason you'd want to come here. Because even people who used to live here, they'll come here and they'll say, "Bloody hell, it hasn't changed, has it? We haven't been here for how many years, and nothing's changed!" ... It does feel like we're back in the eighties or something.'

Within this context, rather than appearing as a destructive or homogenising force, the Tesco scheme was often viewed as a possible solution to West Bromwich's economic misfortunes and the drudgery it entailed. Chris, a young information assistant at The Public, summed up this attitude best: 'I don't know whether it'll change West Brom for the better ... But it's going to be one of the biggest Tescos in Europe, so that surely by its very definition should make a lot of people come from far and wide, and I'm sure people wouldn't complain about coming to West Brom, rather than at the moment when, apart from here, there's little else to see.'

Anita's and Chris's attitudes could be read as expressions of resignation towards the town's exploitation by a multi-national corporation, informed by a lack of alternatives. Yet despite their frustration with the neglected state of the town and their pragmatism towards its redevelopment, the people that I walked with portrayed West Bromwich as a significant site of meaning and a continual source of pride. For example, many people described their pride in the Oak House and the Manor House, two Tudor buildings, which, although not deemed of national significance, were regarded as landmarks in the town. Furthermore, places that had played important roles within people's

lives continued to hold significance even when they no longer existed. For instance, one of the participants led me to a car park where the town's swimming baths had once stood and recounted some of the happy childhood memories that she still associated with the site.

Following the walks, I worked with one of the participants, Sarah Duncombe, to script and record an audio tour of West Bromwich town centre, based on the routes and stories that people had shared with me. Also entitled *Palimpsest*, the tour consists of eleven audio points along a circular route (Figure 1). At each point, a female narrator, who appears to have been in the town since it first emerged from its surrounding heathlands, recounts stories about the making and remaking of the town centre. The narrator's implied immortality is a reference to what I came to regard as people's resilience in the face of profound urban change. Articulated through a continued sense of pride, such resilience can be understood as the resident population's ongoing capacity to establish and articulate meanings in a place which might otherwise appear to have been annihilated by a global corporation.

Michel de Certeau describes such everyday forms of resilience as 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1988, pp.34–9). Unlike the 'strategies' of power, which delineate places

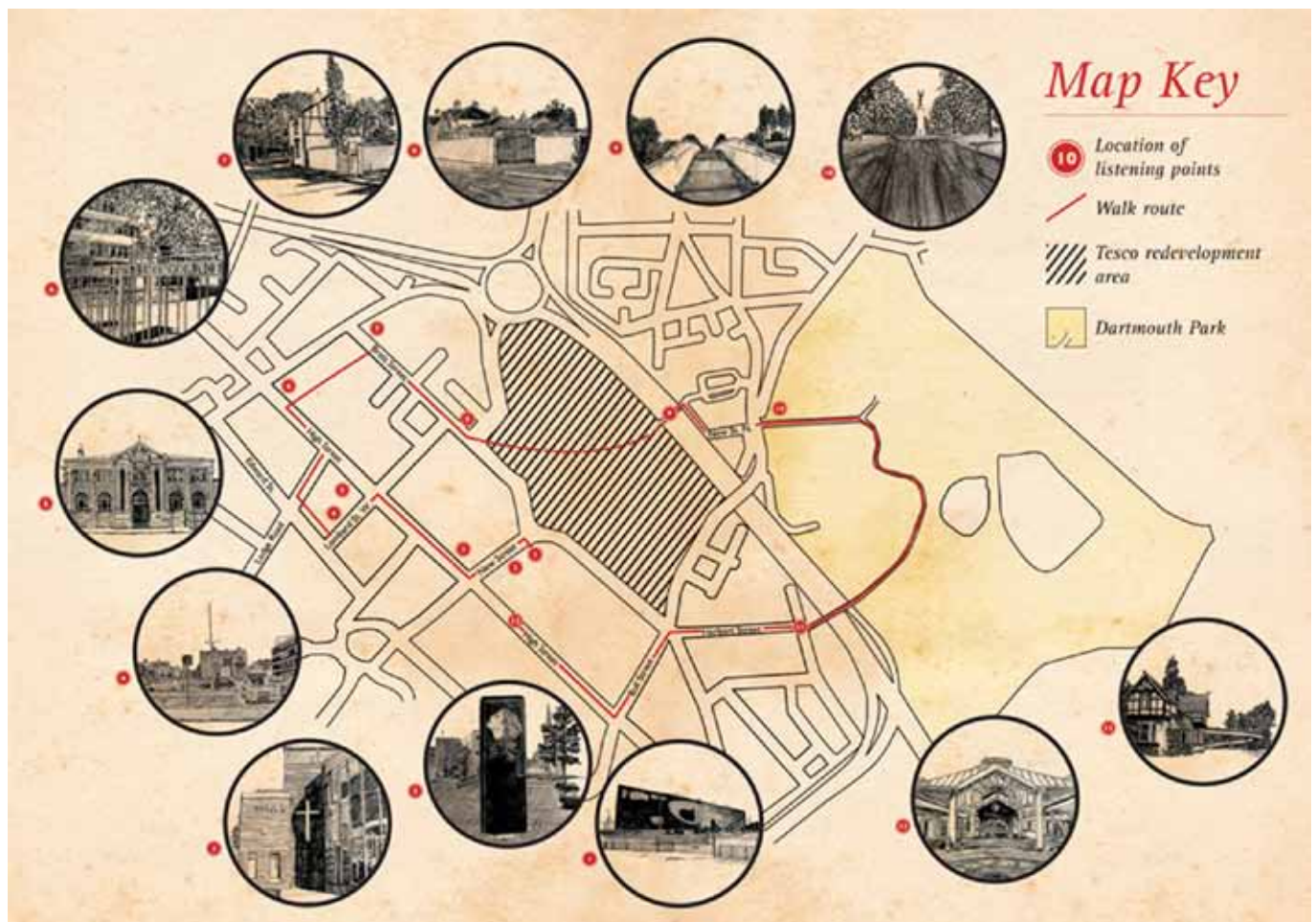


Figure 1: Map of *Palimpsest* audio tour. Image by the author.



Figure 2: Sarah leading the *Palimpsest* tour, May 2012. Image by the author.

as private spaces for the administration of external relations, tactics are ‘an art of the weak’, which allow those without power to appropriate and ‘poach’ from the territory of others. Whereas strategising involves gaining an overview and detachment from a place, tactics develop out of a close and sustained relationship with the territory that has been imposed upon the tactician. It therefore presents a way to negotiate the ‘planned and readable’ (p.93) spaces installed through strategies of power. Alongside other everyday practices such as reading, shopping and cooking, de Certeau marks out urban walking as a particularly tactical activity. In contrast with the strategic overview of the urban planner or developer, walking produces intimate, subliminal and embodied knowledge of a place. It therefore allows its practitioners to evade representation and to produce their own ongoing forms of meaning, which constitute senses of place. As de Certeau puts it, ‘the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other’ (p.93).

Within *Palimpsest*, walking not only enabled tactical responses in relation to the place, but also towards the artwork. For example, following the development of the audio tour, I organised a series of ‘live performances’ where Sarah and I led people along the *Palimpsest* route while she narrated the script (Figure 2). During the walks members of the ‘audience’, who were predominantly West Bromwich residents, would often demonstrate their attachment to the place by intervening in the tour. Following Sarah’s narration in a

churchyard, for instance, one person reached inside a tomb and produced a miniature coffin, which transpired to be part of a geocaching game that he had been involved in³. Likewise, a member of the Freemason society led us on an impromptu tour of the town’s Masonic Lodge, which we happened to be passing. In this way, the participants tactically exploited the framework of the tour; in order to produce their own forms of meaning, express their intimate knowledge and present specific versions of the town.

Inspired by the work of George Marcus and his model of para-ethnography these participants might be better described as ‘epistemic partners’ (Marcus, 2007, p.7) who produced their own forms of knowledge within the project. Unlike traditional ethnographic approaches, which seek to develop a ‘rapport’ with ‘informants’ (p.5), para-ethnography is predicated upon a partnership, or ‘affinity’, between the researcher and his or her subjects (p.7) constituting a process of collective imagination and ‘problem-solving’ (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.173), which can engender new understandings and ways of being in the world. As Marcus explains, ‘what is at stake in the conceptualization of the paraethnographic are formations of culture that are not fully contingent on convention, tradition, and “the past,” but rather constitute future-orientated cognitive practices that can generate novel configurations of meaning and action’ (Marcus, 2007, p.8).

3 Geocaching is a type of treasure hunt, in which players use a Global Positioning System (GPS) device to locate ‘geocache’ containers, which usually contain a logbook and some small trinkets that can be exchanged for other objects.

As opposed to place-making, which encourages 'community engagement' as a way to access local knowledge and traditions, place listening seeks to develop new understandings through the distribution of agency and the production of alternative meanings (Papastergiadis, 2012, p.159). At the end of each *Palimpsest* performance, for example, the groups took part in an informal 'debrief' during which they shared their thoughts about the town and the artwork. These included ideas about alternative ways to regenerate the town centre, such as the re-use of industrial buildings by community organisations, and suggestions of how the audio tour could be improved. Furthermore, the artwork itself became a context for possible future actions. Specifically, a number of people expressed an interest in expanding the project as an ongoing series of audio tours and performances in order to present aspects of West Bromwich that they felt had been forgotten or ignored. The next stage of the project, therefore, may be to collectively develop such activities in the centre of the town.

As a work-in-progress, place listening is an ongoing attempt to acknowledge and facilitate the resilience of people in places that are undergoing change. In this sense, it can be understood as a dialogical process, which seeks to produce spaces of resistance within the dominant narratives of a place. As Steve Pile contends, resistance is not necessarily a subversive or oppositional practice, but can also constitute ways of living through, or getting round, the 'symptoms of different power relations' (Pile, 1997, p.3). By employing embodied, sustained and relational methods, which reveal the prosaic, extraordinary and contradictory relationships that constitute senses of place, place listening challenges essentialist and disempowering representations of places, such as West Bromwich, as the victims of globalisation. At the same time, it also strives to harness the resilience of people, by envisaging alternative possibilities. The challenge of place listening, then, is to locate and open up the gaps in the institutional and political frameworks of public art commissioning, in which collective and cosmopolitan imaginations of a place might be articulated and made real.

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TOWARDS A COSMOPOLITAN CRITICALITY? RELATIONAL AESTHETICS, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA AND TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH PAD THAI

Renate Dohmen

Abstract

Marsha Meskimmon and Nikos Papastergiadis have responded to contemporary art's concern with transculturalism, audience participation and intersubjectivity by re-articulating the cosmopolitan in relation to both aesthetics and globalisation. Dohmen investigates how their cosmopolitanism translates into a mode of critical address and probes this question with regard to the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, a key proponent of relational aesthetics, an art movement of the 1990s championing audience participation and the intersubjective. Even though Tiravanija expressly draws attention to his Thai background by cooking pad thai in the gallery, Dohmen detects a striking disavowal of cultural alterity at the heart of relational aesthetics, which she regards as untenable within the context of the art world's increasing internationalisation. Dohmen demonstrates how relational aesthetics appropriated key aspects of Tiravanija's Thai-derived outlook while asking how a cosmopolitan outlook might redress and repair this marked critical Eurocentricity.

My essay probes the scenarios set up by the Thai-Argentinian artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, often referred to as the 'poster boy of relational aesthetics' (Perreault, 2011, n.p.) (Figure 1), in relation to questions of alterity and transnational encounter foregrounded in recent re-articulations of the cosmopolitan by Nikos Papastergiadis and Marsha Meskimmon. The proposition is that while relational aesthetics and contemporary articulations of the cosmopolitan share an interest in