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Another Space: Gleaning the Urban Littoral

Les Roberts

Abstract

Another Space is a short ethnographic film about artist Antony Gormley's installation 'Another Place' at Crosby Beach north of Liverpool. The visuals, shot on a visit to the beach in Easter 2009, are cut to a mosaic of voices drawn from interviews conducted with visitors to the beach. Respondents are asked what the artwork means to them and what feelings and emotions it evokes. This article, written as an accompaniment to the film, as well as to Hazel Andrew's study published in the edited volume *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience, and Spaces In-between* (2012), provides an auto-ethnographic reflection on the installation and beachscape as a liminal space. As a marked landscape – the 'site of artist Antony Gormley's installation Another Place' – by what measure is it possible to stake out the parameters that set Crosby beach apart from more routine landscapes of everyday consumption and spectacle? What makes it 'another place' as distinct from, say, (just) 'another space'? Gleaning the urban littoral that defines this stretch of the Mersey estuary, the film and article explore an experiential framework by which to gauge the performative status of the beach as a liminal landscape.

Key words: Art, ethnography, performativity, beachscape, visual methods.

To view the film on our youtube channel click on this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/TourismConsumption1?feature=mhee>

It could be me but the sign marking the direction to Antony Gormley's Another Place from the A565 in Crosby, Merseyside (a reassuringly brown sign, promise of an imminent leisure experience) has on more than one occasion led me to another place again; not the one I had intended, but rather a morass of residential streets and dead ends that demand a requisite local knowledge of which I have been lamentably deficient. Should I park up and take my chances on foot? Or turn around and keep going in the hope of eventually stumbling on the visitor car park (there must be a visitor car park)? Tucked away, like the phalanx of wind turbines that hug the mouth of the estuary, Gormley's centurial army of naked iron clones – variously time-sculpted and barnacle-clad – inhabit the fringes of landscape: edgelands, margins, a liminal zone of civic ambiguity where the mundanity of well-tended lawns and domestic recycling bleeds into a space that resists the imposition of a clearly discernable narrative. Discarded condoms, hypodermic needles, the detritus of

Sunday afternoon family outings, crisp packets, dog walkers, dog shit, *flâneurs* and gleaners, a triad of crosses (Calvary-on-Sea), a shrivelled iron penis girded with sand, portakabin toilets, a burger van, ball-games, an abandoned flip-flop, bare-footed children, an ice cream van, seaside promenaders, public art pilgrims, curious on-lookers (come to see what all the fuss is about), and, looking out to sea, an irregular constellation of solitary figures: a mingling of the living and the dead, some passing through, others frozen in time and space. This tapestry of the urban littoral, scattered northward of Liverpool's industrial peripheries (the container terminal at Seaforth), plays performative host to an admixture of the ludic, sacred, prosaic, aesthetic, commercial and touristic. A liminal landscape, Crosby Beach may be 'another place' (meaning what exactly: a place of alterity and otherness, a heterotopia, a place of transcendence, or transition?), but, as a marked landscape – the 'site of artist Antony Gormley's installation *Another Place*' – by what measure is it possible to stake out the parameters that set it apart from more routine landscapes of everyday consumption and spectacle? In other words, what makes it 'another place' as distinct from, say, (just) 'another space'?

These and other questions have drawn myself and Hazel Andrews to Crosby beach on a number of occasions with the somewhat vague intent of seeking some form of communion with the space and its evanescent dwellers. The ambiguous qualities of this liminal landscape were also the subject of the short film *Another Space*, shot on a visit to the beach on Easter Bank Holiday Monday 2009 and subsequent occasions as part of an ethnographic study conducted by Hazel and her students at Liverpool John Moores University (see Andrews 2012 for a fuller discussion of this research and its findings).

After the probable initial hiatus arrival at the beach eventually affirms the fact that yes, there is indeed a visitor car park and that to enter via the roadway entrance is seen as the proper route that Gormley pilgrims should follow (why else erect the visitor information sign at this point?). For initiates arriving by foot from further down the coastline the official 'explanation' of the artwork remains off-limits until they arrive at this point, their thirst, hunger or urinary needs conveniently provided for by the

available facilities. As with visitors to an art gallery whose gaze barely caresses the paintings as it zooms in on the adjacent labels, the Another Place visitor information sign is the hub and focus of much on-site activity, perhaps more so, in some instances, than that associated with the artwork itself. Indeed, if arriving at high tide, unless you are prepared to linger awhile for the nearest statues to start putting in an appearance, chances are you might not see the artwork at all. In which case the statues depicted on the sign would have to suffice insofar as they contribute towards what staff in the Sefton Council marketing department would no doubt call the Another Place 'visitor experience'.

Site markers, as Dean MacCannell, writing in the nascent years of the sociology and anthropology of tourism back in the 1970s observed, displace or in some cases obliterate the actual site/sight of attraction by the very process of signification. Visitors amble up to the sign, some walk away bemused, others flip their gaze back and forth between the beachscape and marker, others dwell on the textuality of the artwork: the way it 'harnesses the ebb and flow of the tide', or 'human life is tested against planetary time'. Gormley's reflection that 'the seaside is a good place...' conjures Thomas More's *eutopia* (good place), which is, of course, neologically coupled with *outopia* (no place). Utopia is good but only insofar as it remains constitutively out of reach. The semiotic double bind that the seasoned traveller and pilgrim knows only too well. It is the getting there that counts. Arrival is bound to be a disappointment. (Think of the film *Stalker*, or Сталкер to give it its Russian name.) By this token the liminality of the Another Place experience is all about process and practice: the careful and curious excavation of meaning by throwing oneself at its contingency and geographical diffuseness (not too literally, mind: as the sign warns, 'Crosby beach is a non-bathing beach, with areas of soft sand and mud and a risk of changing tides'). The artwork performs and signifies itself. Anything else is not only superfluous but detracts from the experiential liminality of 'being there': Dasein – the Heideggerian phenomenology of being-in-the-world – reduced to mere ('inauthentic') spectacle. In actuality, the sign appears to do little more than provide the rationale for the on-site amenities; the safety and convenience of which, while practical, family-friendly and eminently sensible, in all other respects drains the space of any

residual mythic or magico-religious power. Managed liminality is negated liminality: it is oxymoronic. The latent sense of danger, ambiguity and radical uncertainty otherwise evoked by the site is somewhat neutered by an impression that, should things get a little hairy (should one start to lose ground or get out of one's depth, literally and/or metaphorically), one of Gormley's petrified doppels could bid a temporary retreat to the homely comforts of terra firma, perhaps taking time out for a warming cuppa or toilet break. It kills the mood; or rather it kills *that* mood: the one to which we pin expectations of an artwork that ought to performatively function as what Victor Turner once referred to as a 'liminal space-time "pod" or pilgrimage centre' (1982: 120). Whatever transformative energies we might seek to tap from the space are sublimated by the normalcy of the mundane world: another place, another common or garden leisure beach. Perhaps it was ever thus. The beach was there before the installation touched down and presumably will still be there long after it is gone (uprooted, perhaps, to 'another place' – might that be the meaning behind the title: a reference to its functional mobility? Site-*un*-specific art? Art installation-on-tour?).

Where all this seems to be leading to is the none-too-earth shattering realisation that Crosby beach is much like any other leisure beach. That is, a place or space of leisure in which multiple actors perform and engage in a range of social and cultural activities. The statues add a qualitatively different dimension to the experiential ebb and flow of the beachscape, for sure, but their presence enhances rather than subverts the quotidian architecture of the space as a place of leisure. The ludic potential of the beach is made more manifest by the provision of an abundance of genitalia at which to point and laugh, stroke suggestively, simulate fellatio, dress up or plaster with sand and mud. Does this qualify as an expression of the carnivalesque? Hardly. For that to be even partly the case sex and nudity would still have to be a potent societal taboo rather than a ubiquitous and commoditized feature of everyday cultural consumption. Playfulness is further realised by providing beachgoers with the opportunity to adorn the statues, a popular activity whereby the intersubjectivity of human actors translates to that between human and sculpted human form. Clothing the cold metal nakedness of the statues humanizes them,

embodies them with warmth, character and identity, or else conceals their shame, re-codifying the beach as a public space where normative social rules and values apply. To go naked is out of place: a transgressive act. To adorn is to conform; to mitigate against the risk of danger or moral corruption (see Andrews 2011: 138). But then if this did represent a serious explanation for the act of adornment then surely a more effective means by which to fulfil such a moral imperative would be to dress all one hundred of the statues and to ensure they remain in a state of decency by patrolling the beach on a semi-permanent basis. Such a performance would be so extreme and so out of the ordinary that it would itself qualify as a transgressive act. Other beach-goers would give such a figure an extremely wide berth; he or she would have a touch of madness or danger about them. The liminality dial would swing resolutely back towards the red.

While the beach, as with many public spaces, doubtless attracts its fair share of the deranged, eccentric and socially displaced, by all accounts it is anything but 'another place' in the sense of accommodating an ensemble cast of the marginalised or those caught in the interstices of more stable psychosocial coordinates. Nor does it represent a landscape whose initiates are gripped in an intoxicating spell of 'communitas'. The liminality dial barely registers a flicker. If anything, with the novelty of the artwork having long worn off, for the most part the presence of the statues probably passes without comment. These solitary figures, lost in their own solipsistic worlds – sunken in the deepest mire of private contemplation – blend in well with their all-too-human counterparts. Another Place is just another place. As inconspicuous and unremarkable as the next. To access its more elusive or transcendent (and yes, liminal) spaces demands less a knowledge of the geography of the beachscape than of its temporal and rhythmic topographies. When not where. Now not here. Stalking the silent sentinels of the Mersey becomes an act of wayfinding; it delocalizes, de-fetishizes space by throwing it open to the elements, to the vagaries of time. For the anthropologist Tim Ingold, wayfinding 'depends upon the attunement of the traveller's movements in response to the movements, in his or her surroundings, of other people, animals, the wind, celestial bodies, and so on. Where nothing moves there is nothing to which one can respond' (2000: 242).

Gleaning the urban littoral that defines this stretch of the Mersey estuary is to navigate a landscape that is liminal despite, not because of the *Another Place* installation. The statues serve to objectify the fragile relationship between people and place, but it is a relationship that is as elemental and tangible as the statues themselves. Gormley's clonal emissaries bear mute witness to a landscape over which they have no control and for which they have no responsibility. Beyond exploiting the beach as an outdoor gallery and performative space what exactly is the artist's stake in this landscape? What is or should his responsibility be in terms refining a local semiosis of place? In what ways does the artwork inform and reflect the wider social, cultural, political and aesthetic dynamics of place-making in the area (surely an important function of any site-specific art)? Is the sign, blazoned as it is with a roll-call of corporate logos (South Sefton Partnership, Sefton Council, Mersey Waterfront, Arts Council England, Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Company), its only real function? A purely instrumental and utilitarian mechanism by which to trigger (in the Frankensteinian sense of 'pulling the lever') an ensuing programme of regeneration and renewal? Public art as a form of contagious magic? Would the sculptures be there if Liverpool had not been European Capital of Culture in 2008? And are the statues seen as evidence of the city's cultural credentials or as necessary precursors to it being considered worthy in the first place?

The film *Another Space* answers none of these questions. More modestly it presents itself as little more than an arbitrary flux of experience: a visual sketch of the beach as it was found at a specific moment in time. We were there. We did some filming. End of. Where the film does start to reflect on these wider questions is in the mosaic of voices of those who visited the beach on subsequent occasions and who are invited to comment on what the artwork means for them. Again, there is no singular narrative. Their views are presented as they are found. None are weighted with more significance than any of the others. The film merely says: 'Here is the beach. Here is the artwork (or at least elements of it). Here are some people. Make of it what you will'. It is indexical, like the visitor information sign. But unlike the sign, it strives not to contain, to map, to orchestrate meaning: to self-validate by processes of its own

signification. Its aim, if anything, is the opposite: to encourage wandering and wayfinding outside the frame. In this sense, for those setting out to explore the landscape and installation for themselves my injunction would simply be to 'get lost'. Meant in the nicest possible way. Oh, and to go on foot.

To view the film on youtube click on this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0TSOBhWvtA>

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